Hanging Out with TRACY McGRADY
BY KARL TARO GREENFELD

Playing It Cool in RUSSIAN HOCKEY
BY MICHAEL FARBER

Sports Illustrated

NFL PLAYOFFS
WILD-CARD WEEKEND
5 Questions
BY PETER KING
Who Will Win
BY DR. Z

TROJANS

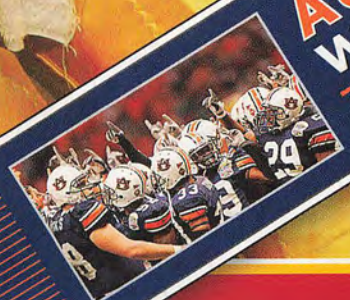
55-19

USC Hammers Oklahoma to Win The National Championship

BY AUSTIN MURPHY

Matt Leinart throws a record five TD passes

AUBURN
What about Us?
TIGERS ALSO 13-0



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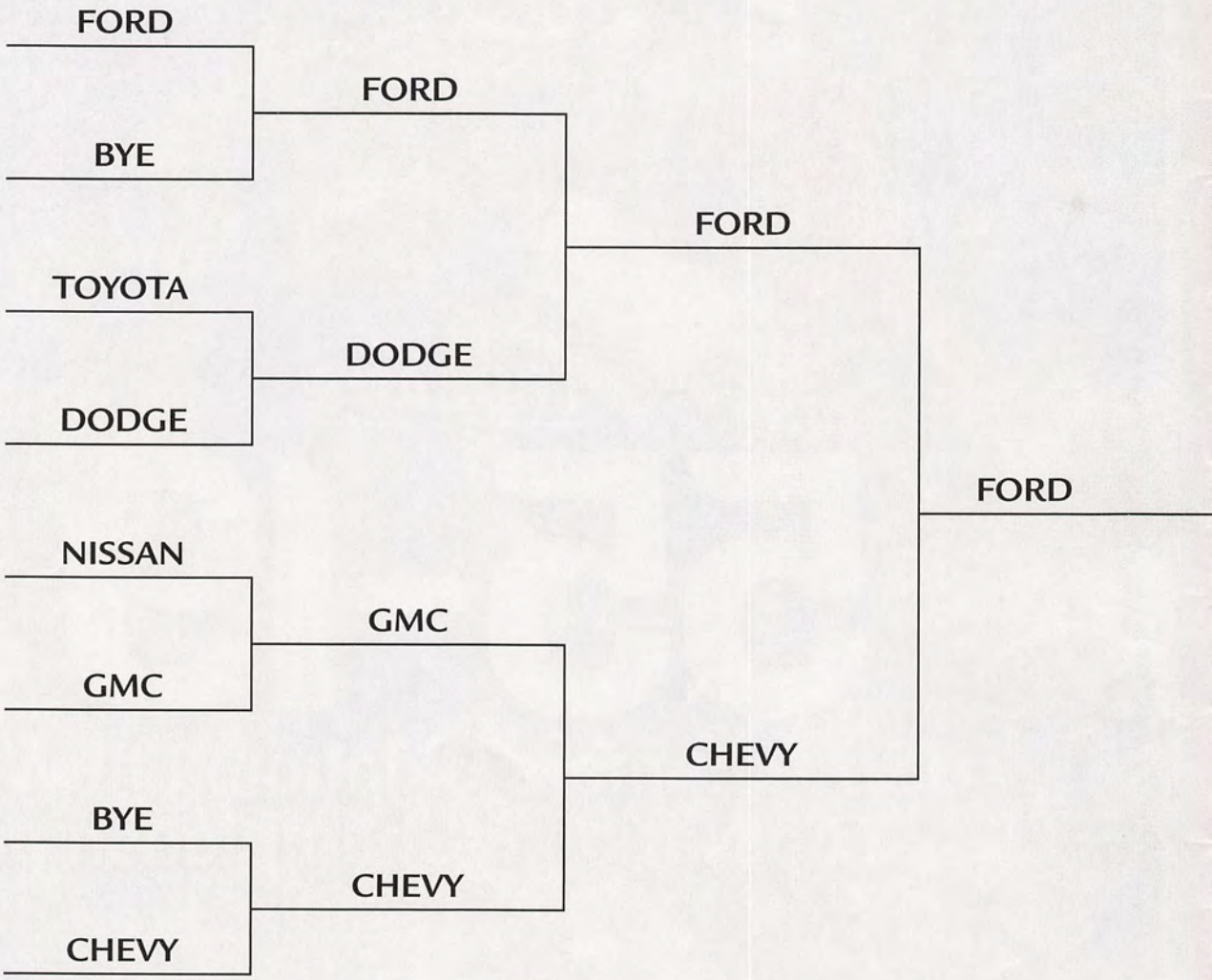

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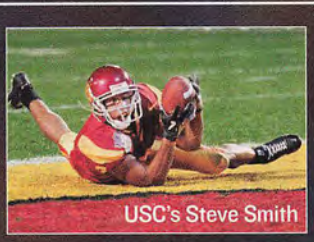
The Lineup


USC's Steve Smith

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

34 Without a Doubt
A thundering victory in the Orange Bowl gives USC back-to-back titles
by Austin Murphy

37 Second to None
That's what 13–0 Auburn is calling itself after winning the Sugar Bowl
by Lars Anderson

38 All-Bowl Team
Not even Santa had a better holiday than Texas quarterback Vince Young
by Kelley King

40 2005 Outlook
An early peek at next season's Top 10 and the Heisman front-runners
by Mark Beech

PRO FOOTBALL

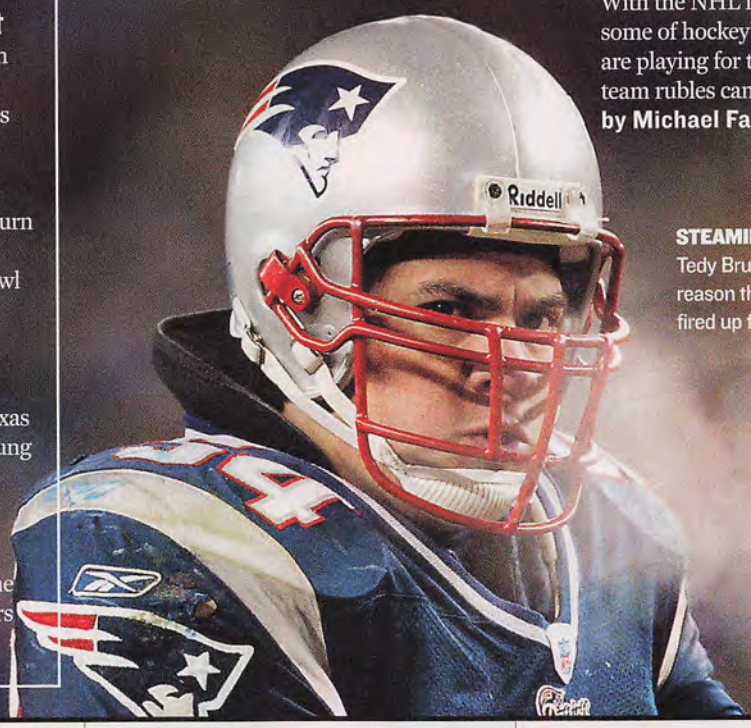
42 Gotta Have a Bruschi
Make that Tedy Bruschi, and New England has the only one. That's why the Pats are going for their third title in four years
by Josh Elliott

PRO BASKETBALL

50 The Good Life?
He may be a rich NBA superstar with his own jet, but Tracy McGrady has worries, too
by Karl Taro Greenfeld

HOCKEY

58 Tampa Bay to Tatarstan
With the NHL in cold storage, some of hockey's biggest stars are playing for the best hockey team rubles can buy
by Michael Farber


STEAMIN' Linebacker Tedy Bruschi is a big reason the Patriots are all fired up for the playoffs.

Departments

4 Leading Off
12 Letters
15 Air and Space
A newborn daughter avoids being named after a beer but is instantly baptized into sports **by Steve Rushin**
16 Scorecard
- Billy Crystal, sportswriter
- Gretzky's next Gretzky
- Farewell to Johnny Oates

26 Faces in the Crowd
28 Players
76 Life of Reilly
A couple make their first scuba dive during the Asian tsunami and live to tell the tale **by Rick Reilly**

Inside . . .

70 College Basketball
- Nothing plain about Kansas

72 Baseball
- Where's Carlos Beltran going?

74 The NBA
- Wizards have the right guards

Cover

PHOTOGRAPH BY
BOB ROSATO

INSET PHOTOS: John Biever (Favre); David E. Klutho (Auburn)

SI Extra

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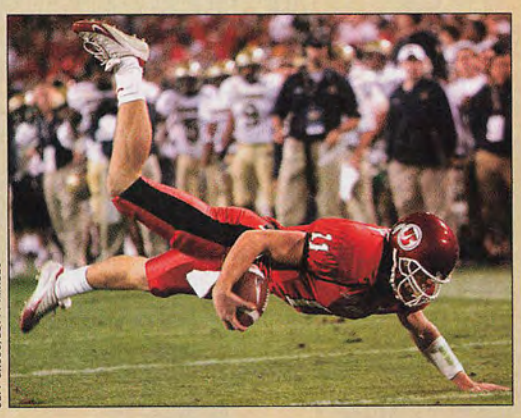
DAMIAN STROHMEYER (BRUSCHI); HEINZ KLUETMEIER

74
U'DH
NIKE



JEFF GROSS/GETTY IMAGES

Leading Off

Pitt Stoppers

The Utah offensive line gets in sync before its Fiesta Bowl matchup with Pittsburgh on New Year's Day in Tempe, Ariz. The drilling paid off, as quarterback Alex Smith (inset) and the Mountain West champs rolled to a 35–7 win over the Panthers to finish 12–0.

Photograph by John W. McDonough

For daily Web-only Leading Off galleries, go to **si.com/scorecard**.

HORNS
TEXAS
10
MICHIGAN
MICHIGAN

Leading Off

In-Vince-able

Texas QB Vince Young outsprints Michigan defenders for one of his four TD runs in the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day in Pasadena. Dusty Mangum (inset) hit a 37-yard field goal as time expired to give the Longhorns a 38–37 win.

Photograph by Donald Miralle/Getty Images

RICHARD MACKSON

WAC
BOISE STATE
57
LOUISVILLE
17

Leading Off

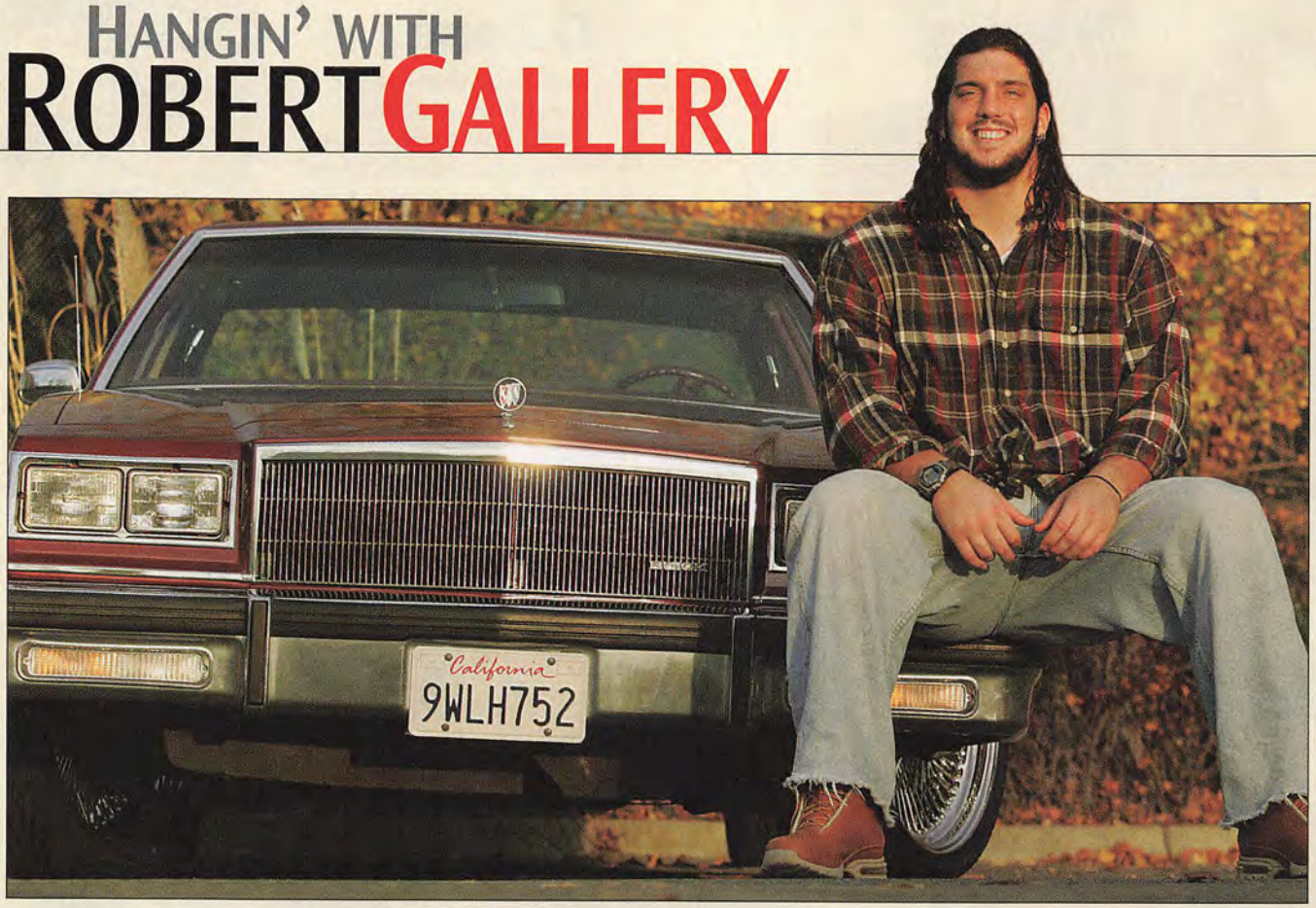
O Zone

Louisville QB Stefan LeFors scrambles from Boise State tacklers at the Liberty Bowl in Memphis last Friday. LeFors and his counterpart, Jared Zabransky (inset), led the nation's two most potent offenses to a combined 848 yards; Louisville won 44–40.

Photograph by Jonathan Brownfield

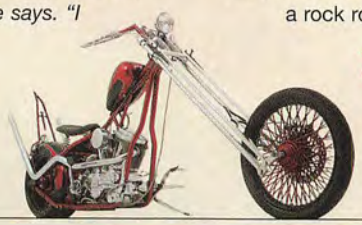
DAVID E. KLUTHO

HANGIN' WITH ROBERT GALLERY



DON'T EXPECT ROBERT GALLERY to renounce his roots. The Masonville, Iowa, native signed a lucrative contract last summer as the Oakland Raiders' top draft choice, but he won't trade his Midwestern upbringing for the Bay Area's urban ethos anytime soon. "I'm getting used to all the people and the traffic," the 6'7", 325-pound offensive tackle says, "but I don't think I'll ever become a city kid." During the season he prefers hanging at home, watching movies and surfing the Internet to scope classic cars—though he might never forsake his beloved 1984 Buick LeSabre (above)*, which he's driven since high school. "My seat's sitting in the backseat, pretty much," he says. "I bent it up pretty good too, getting in and out."*

BOAT SHOPPING **What condition is the car in?** I fixed it up. Well, somewhat. I got all the dents removed and the rust sanded down. I got it repainted and put rims on it. But the interior—you can tell it's 20 years old. **What do your teammates say about it?** A couple have said, 'You can quit this now. You can go buy an Escalade.' But a lot of guys like it. **You've got a thing for old cars.** My parents always bought us cars to drive to school—big, American, all-steel cars. I'll probably be making a purchase in the off-season. Like a '60s Continental convertible, four-door suicide doors. Like a boat. I love big, big cars.



MEDIA GALLERY

LOVES OF A LINEMAN

DVDS	TV SHOWS
✓ Shrek	✓ American Chopper
✓ The Cable Guy	✓ Monster Garage
✓ Braveheart	✓ American Hot Rod
"The war movies, I have a bunch. I could go through a ton of 'em."	*"I'm big into the car shows. I've gotta catch those every week."*

FIELD TRIP **Do you miss Iowa at all?** I do. I grew up on a farm. I enjoy going back and helping, especially during harvest time. I just like being outside, away, in the middle of nowhere. It's nice to do the things in the country you can't get away with in the city (*laughs*). **Ever imagine taking your teammates home?** It would be funny to take some of the guys from here, because I'm sure a lot of these city kids have never seen a pig or a cow, or been on a tractor or combine. The funniest is kids who don't know what a gravel road is. I live on a rock road, and they're like, 'What is this?'

TOUGH LOVE **Your degree from Iowa is in elementary education. Any great mishaps while student teaching?** Umm, that can be put in a magazine? **Sounds like there's something there.** Well, one funny thing: I asked for a volunteer, and I called on this little, tiny girl. Another student got mad and goes, 'What?! That broad didn't even have her hand up!' (*laughs heartily*) **He called her a broad?** I couldn't believe the kid knew it. You have to discipline them, but in the back of your mind you're laughing. **Do you imagine teaching when you're done playing?** I think I'll give it a shot. I don't know how long I'll last, but I think it would be fun to do.

WITH ALEC MORRISON PHOTOS BY BRAD MANGIN (TOP), DISCOVERY CHANNEL

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Flip Remarks

BALCO BLOWS UP
HARD QUESTIONS UGLY REVELATIONS
San Diego Chargers: The NFL's Biggest Surprise
Sports Illustrated
Trojans Roll
USC and Oklahoma Are Set for A National Championship Showdown
37

Reggie Bush's hotdog flip into the end zone for the first touchdown of USC's regular-season-ending 29–24 defeat of archrival UCLA, immortalized on your Dec. 13 cover, justifiably resulted in a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty for excessive celebration. If across the country next season there's a rash of impressionable high school players pulling similar stunts, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED will have only itself to blame.

Gene Miller, Huntington Beach, Calif.

One Pill Makes You Larger

While Richard Hoffer may have intended to make a point about human nature in *The Blind Pursuit of Perfection* (Dec. 13), he whiffed badly. While noting that people like to improve themselves in sundry ways, he let dishonest and immoral athletes off the hook by saying that "character is sometimes neglected in the pursuit of perfection." Athletes who use drugs to enhance their performance are not only breaking the law but also being dishonest with themselves, their fans, their teams and, most important, the sport they often profess to love. Drug use is the coward's way. Making excuses for pampered cheats does not serve sports well.

Doug Magill, Solon, Ohio

I think my son Jason should be on the cover of SI. He not only takes steroids, he also injects himself daily with growth hormone—just like the athletes. Jason is fighting a battle, but there isn't a pennant at stake. He's fighting for his life. The real story isn't that million-dollar athletes are cheating to get to the top of their field; the real story is that children who truly need growth hormone can't afford to get it. Our family had to rely on a charitable foundation called Genetec Access to Care to obtain the growth hormone that enables Jason to fight the chronic disease cystic fibrosis.

Linda Robichaud, Lanesborough, Mass.

I teach personal trainers and know that when a trainer recommends dietary supplements, the trainer may stand to benefit financially by making a commission on the sale of the supplement. Before taking any over-the-counter nutritional supplement, people should consult an appropriate medical professional. Many supplements have not been laboratory tested, and taking them could cause an adverse reaction with other medications. If a personal trainer encourages you to purchase any nutritional supplement, *run*, do not walk, away (consider it a free workout).

Pete McCall, Washington, D.C.

Buying Bonds

I agree with Rick Reilly's skepticism about Barry Bonds (LIFE OF REILLY, Dec. 13), but why has Reilly yet to criticize former Raider Bill Romanowski for his relationship with BALCO? I remember Reilly defending Romanowski's work ethic and clean living on "supplements" (LIFE OF REILLY, Sept. 1, 2003), but then Romo tested positive for steroids two months later. If we are going to attack dishonesty, let's not attack only those who have snubbed us for interviews.

Matthew Noel, San Francisco

I believe Barry Bonds too. Except I also believe that you are innocent until proven guilty. I believe that if the Feds had even a single shred of evidence that Bonds lied on the stand, they'd be trying him for perjury instead of trying him in the court of public opinion. And I believe that a decade of petty attacks and snide comments about Bonds makes Reilly seem like a bitter hack.

Matt Morin, Berkeley, Calif.

Vice and Easy

What a disgrace it would be to have a professional sports franchise in Las Vegas (*Why Not Vegas?*, Dec. 13). There are enough moral issues in the NBA and MLB the way it is. Do we really need to add strippers and slot machines to the mix?

Troy Steven Johnson, Iowa City

David Stern is "concerned that moving a team to Las Vegas would harm his league's image." Exactly what image are you worried about, Mr. Commissioner?

Gary Chaize, Bradenton, Fla.

Given the recent actions of NBA players and fans, a move to Las Vegas might actually improve the image of the NBA.

Joseph M. Hanlon, Mokena, Ill.

Irish Sighs

As a Notre Dame alumnus I watched in dismay as the Irish were dismantled by a superior Southern Cal team, but I still took great pride in knowing that Notre Dame would never compromise its high academic and ethical standards to win a football game. Or so I thought until Ty Willingham was fired (SCORECARD, Dec. 13). Today the shine is clearly gone from the proud traditions that once made Irish football unique. It will take time to get it back, but let's start now by handing Notre Dame athletic director Kevin White his walking papers. Never has one man done so much damage in so little time. And by the way, we wish you well, Coach Willingham.

Adrian Davoli, Enon, Ohio

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Diaper Dandy

by Steve Rushin

BECAUSE ONLY about 5% of babies are born on their due dates, there was much wagering in my family as to when, exactly, my wife would give birth. And though the due date of our daughter-to-be happened to fall during the holiday season, her impending arrival evoked not Santa Claus but Santa Anita. Indeed, the frenzied action riding on her delivery ensured that she would enter the world like Pete Rose. Which is to say, headfirst and surrounded by betting slips.

Of course, my wife also had a piece of the action, so she bluffed all other bettors, announcing more false contractions than Bud Selig.

It isn't easy being the unborn offspring of sports-addled parents whose entire extended family is also sports-addled, as is our circle of friends. (How sports-addled are we? We have an *on-deck* circle of friends.)

As a professional athlete and sportswriter, respectively, my wife and I were infantilized by sports. Which may explain why we are now sport-ilizing our infant. Naturally, we started the process before she was born. This can't be healthy, can it?

But being a sports fetus *does* have its advantages. My unborn daughter enjoyed the prenatal attention of NBA All-Stars. In a locker room in Philadelphia, Phoenix Suns point guard Steve Nash told me that he and his longtime girlfriend, Alejandra Amarilla, had just become parents of twin girls. "Lola and Bella," said Nash. "If we had had triplets, the third would have been Stella. You guys can have that name."

"Stella," I said, stroking my chin in contemplation. "It *is* the name of one of my favorite beers." Nash looked at me with pity. We agreed that the bold taste of a Belgian lager was insufficient inspiration for so christening my daughter.

In the end, my wife and I chose a name like an unplayable Scrabble rack: Siobhan, from the ancient Gaelic word for *unpronounceable*. Indeed, even before her birth, Siobhan—"Shuh-VAWN"—would already be butchered as Soybean, Chevron and Shakeyourbonbon.

"Love the name," said our friend Mike Gorman. "She will drive play-by-play guys crazy in 2020." This is saying something, when you consider that Gorman—as play-by-play guy for the Boston Celtics—has conquered, over the years, such C's as Vitaly Potapenko, Stojko Vrankovic and Ruben Wolkowyski.

"If you need any parenting advice," Orlando Magic senior vice president Pat Williams told me, "don't hesitate to call." I saved his number because Williams and his wife, Ruth, have maintained a sense of humor despite—or more likely as a result of—raising 19 children.

So we had our baby's name and our baby's support group. All we needed now was our baby.

And so the other morning, at 1:15 a.m., we rushed to the emergency room at Hartford Hospital, where a woman waiting in a wheelchair yelled at my wife on our way to maternity, "Rebecca Lobo, shake my hand!" Bent at the waist, jackknifed by labor pains, my wife crossed the room to comply. She grasped the hand of this trauma victim and held it for a pause, the two women bonded by basketball and abdominal agony.

Because Rebecca is 6' 4", her feet hung over the maternity bed by several inches, so that she appeared to be giving birth in a wheelbarrow. When Siobhan arrived, I lopped the umbilical cord like a mayor at a supermarket ribbon-cutting, then held, kissed and victory-lapped her around the room, as if she were the Stanley Cup.

> Our new daughter is already dribbling (like basketball player Mom) and spilling food down her shirt (like sportswriter Dad).

Like it or not, our daughter was instantly baptized into sports. Nurses taught us the "football hold," tucking our infant into an elbow like the ball on the Heisman Trophy. Visitors helped change diapers like a NASCAR pit crew. A nurse noted that she was the fifth baby born on her shift, all girls, so that we could now take on rival hospitals in a basketball game. "Can she suit up on Sunday at St. John's?" asked UConn women's coach Geno Auriemma.

Waiting for her at home were a pink Boston Red Sox jersey, a Minnesota Vikings bib, a Notre Dame sweatshirt and—from a depraved friend in New York—a full wardrobe of Knicks babywear. Because her aunt Rachel works for Adidas, Siobhan's closet already looks like Missy Elliott's, pimped out with sweat suits and 21 pairs of sneakers. Our daughter is more than welcome to hate sports. But if she does, she'll have nothing to wear.

And while she's already dribbling (like basketball player Mom) and spilling food down her shirt (like sportswriter Dad), for the moment she's more enamored of Poop Dreams than *Hoop Dreams*. Which is wonderful.

Because the moment she was born, it felt like Christmas morning. In fact, it *was* Christmas morning. Within minutes of her arrival, Siobhan had wrapped her entire hand around my little finger. But of course I knew it was the other way around, and I was really wrapped around hers. □

For a collection of Steve Rushin's columns, go to **SI.com/writers.**

SIMON BRUTY

Sports Illustrated

Edited by
MARK BECHTEL AND
STEPHEN CANNELLA

"I remember bloodying my

Scorec

Double Play

Billy Crystal's one-man Broadway show, *700 Sundays*, is both an intimate memoir of growing up in the '50s and '60s—and a lesson in how sports unites us all **By Michael Bamberger**

THE MOST POPULAR play now on Broadway is a superb piece of sportswriting. Billy Crystal's one-man show, *700 Sundays*, is the story of a kid from Long Island and his relationship with his baseball-loving father, Jack. You'll laugh, you'll cry—you'll get Billy's oral history as an infielder on scholarship at a college (Marshall) that did not have a baseball team, in a state (West Virginia) where Crystal was, in his memory, the only Jew.

Crystal is drawing men to the theater in droves—the show is sold out for the remainder of its three-month run—because much of his material was culled from fields, gyms and locker rooms. At an SRO matinee I saw last week with my mother and father, the stranger to my right, I learned at intermission, once worked as a gardener for Bart Giamatti, the former baseball commissioner.

As a kid, my father got me reading *The New Yorker* by pointing me toward pieces that ran under the heading "The Sporting Scene." Crystal employs a similar trick, using his sporting life subversively, to create intimacy with his audience. Crystal, a true fan, understands that sports embodies life's joys and sorrows. He gets that sports comfort people. (In *When Harry Met Sally* his character goes to a Giants football game with a friend and pours out his heart about his wife's leaving him, interrupting himself to do the wave.) When the Red Sox finally beat the Yankees, when Dale Earnhardt died, when Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile, strangers spoke and Earth, for a couple revolutions, anyway, was a friendlier place.

Crystal tells about trying out for his Long Beach, Long Island, high school basketball team as a junior. His father had just died, collapsing after nailing a spare in his weekly bowling game. When Billy flopped at his tryout, the coach asked about things at home, and when he found out, he kept the little guard when he could have cut him. "It remains the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me," Crystal says.

One of Crystal's best scenes has George W. Bush at Yankee Stadium for Game 3 of the 2001 World Series, seven weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks. Crystal praises the honorary called strike the President threw from the Stadium mound. But later, when Bush is sitting with Crystal, Regis Philbin and Henry Kissinger, the actor grows tired of the overly chatty President's incessant interruptions: "Billy *C.*, Billy *C.*, Billy *C.*!" Crystal is left wondering if 911 might also be Bush's SAT score. The Diamondbacks beat the Yankees that year, four games to three. Yep, in one series, the Yankees lost four times. Crystal remembers his elderly mother's response: "Well, that'll never happen again." For a punchline, he just shrugs. In the last row of the Broadhurst Theater's upper deck, Bart's old gardener and I cracked up.

The name-dropping in *700 Sundays* is always purposeful.

Get a fresh version of SCORECARD every weekday at **SI.com/scorecard.**

first nose. I was like, 'Yeah!' —HILARY SWANK Q+A, PAGE 22

ard

brawlers, he's standing up for his era, and for little guys everywhere.

Crystal has been down the sports road before: In old bits he did a dead-on Ali and Cosell, and he played an NBA referee in *Forget Paris*. This time he's telling a father-son love story shot on location at Yankee Stadium, backed by a jazz score. Crystal shows the Super 8 footage his father, a jazz impresario, shot at the Stadium in 1953, at Crystal's first game, in seats that belonged to Louis Armstrong. Suddenly a young Mickey Mantle fills the frame. (Nearly a half-century later Crystal directed *61**, about Roger Maris's and Mantle's epic 1961 season.) When Jack Crystal dies, an aunt asks, "Who's going to take Billy to the baseball games now?"

Crystal's father played baseball for St. John's in the '30s, and he taught Billy how to hit the curve on Sunday afternoons, all summer long, in the crisp "World Series weather," right through the first flurries of December. Crystal figures he had 700 good Sundays with his father.

At the end of the show my own father and mother and everybody else stood for a curtain call. The scrappy little utility man popped out from his stage Long Beach home to suggest that we all savor our Sundays before there were none left. As the house lights came up, I tried to hide my eyes from my parents, but they know my moves too well.

Crystal mentions Lew Alcindor to tell us that his Long Beach team had to play Brooklyn's Erasmus Hall High, which was even *better* than Power Memorial, Alcindor's Manhattan school. All the while, behind Crystal, blown up big, is a yellowed sports-page clipping about the mismatch. If you want to create a bond with a theater full of strangers, play your personal highlight tape but include some bloopers. Along the way you'll define who you were and who you are. When Crystal, who is 57, mocks today's steroid users and basketball

ILLUSTRATION BY JEFF WONG; DARREN CARROLL/ICON SMI (CROSBY); DAVE SANDFORD/GETTY IMAGES (CROSBY SKATING)

Next Great Thing

At the World Junior Championship a phenom showed that comparisons to Wayne Gretzky aren't off base

Major League Baseball crawled out of the swamp of public opprobrium after the 1994 strike with the help of home runs and the men hitting them in the magical summer of 1998, Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa. When (and perhaps if) the NHL lockout finally ends, an explosion of raw offense isn't likely to rekindle interest in the league—but a personality might. This is an unfair burden to place on a 17-year-old, but Sidney Crosby seems ready for practically anything. A year ago in Helsinki he became the youngest Canadian player ever to score a goal in the World Junior Championship. Through Sunday, Crosby, the most fabulous talent to emerge since Eric Lindros 14 years ago, had six goals and two assists in Team Canada's five-game march to the finals in Grand Forks, N.Dak. (Canada was to take on Russia for the gold medal on Tuesday.)

In an event customarily dominated by 19-year-olds, the precocious Crosby ranked sixth in scoring while buzzing on a line with Patrice Bergeron of the Boston Bruins and Corey Perry of the junior London (Ont.) Knights. Crosby demonstrated all the attributes that Wayne Gretzky saw a year and a half ago when the Great One anointed him a possible successor: the hockey IQ that allowed him to work cute backdoor plays with Bergeron on Canada's lethal power play, wondrous creativity and surprising speed and strength. The era that fostered Gretzky and Mario Lemieux is gone—Gretzky's 92 goals in 1981–82 now seem even more surreal with passing years—but no player since has been as bred for stardom as this polished forward with thick hockey haunches and a quick hockey mind.

Last week the only thing that seemed to throw Crosby was a question. Asked by a Canadian TV reporter about crossing a picket line if the NHL ultimately uses replacement players—he will be the No. 1 draft pick in June, if there is a draft—Crosby said, "I think if I do have the opportunity, I would probably go." The next day he was furiously backchecking against himself, saying he had always dreamed of playing in the NHL but a league without the best players would hardly be the NHL. The firestorm quickly subsided. If the rarely impolitic Gretzky could call New Jersey a "Mickey Mouse operation" two decades ago (the Devils have since won three Stanley Cups), hockey's teenage hope can take a mulligan.

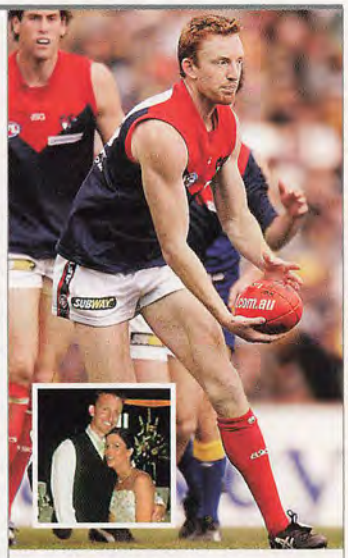
—Michael Farber

After the Flood

The tsunami in Asia touched the sports world, which did its part to aid victims

ON MONDAY the Australian Football League's Melbourne Demons returned to practice after their Christmas break, minus one of their stars. On Dec. 26, eight days after their wedding, defender Troy Broadbridge, 24, and his wife, Trisha, were walking along a beach on Thailand's Ko Phi Phi island when the massive tsunami that wreaked havoc across Southern Asia crashed ashore (LIFE OF REILLY, *page 76*). Trisha was struck by an uprooted bungalow but made her way to safety. Troy disappeared; he was still missing on Monday and was presumed dead.

The tsunami left at least 140,000 dead and countless stories like the Broadbridges' in its wake, some involving international sports figures. Czech supermodel Petra Nemcova, 25, who graced the cover of SI's Swimsuit Issue in 2003, was swept away near Phuket, Thailand. She clung to a tree for eight hours in the swirling water and suffered a broken pelvis. (Her boyfriend, photographer Simon Atlee, is presumed dead.) Not far away, Gaute Larsen, a coach for Norwegian soccer team Odd Grenland, was boarding a boat with his family when the wave swept them a half mile into town. "It was a near-death experience," he said.



SWEPT AWAY Broadbridge (inset, with wife) disappeared; Nemcova (top) barely survived.

Several vacationing Italian soccer stars were stranded in the Maldives for days, and Swedish skiing great Ingemar Stenmark, was nearly caught by the wave while sunbathing in Thailand. Southern Asia is a popular vacation area for Swedes, at least 825 of whom perished in the disaster. Jonas Bjorkman, Sweden's top men's doubles tennis player, said he would give his earnings from this week's ATP Chennai Open—which will be held as scheduled in Chennai, India—to disaster victims.

Sports organizations around the globe joined Bjorkman. The International Cricket Council will hold a benefit all-star series next week in Melbourne. The Red Cross collected contributions from fans at the Rose and Cotton Bowls and at NFL and NBA games. Maria Sharapova, in Thailand for an exhibition with Venus Williams last week, donated $10,000; along with other tennis stars, the two players were also planning an auction to raise funds.

Roberto Clemente Jr., son of the late Pittsburgh Pirates star, had spent much of 2004 planning a New Year's Eve delivery of food and medical supplies to Nicaragua, a symbolic completion of Roberto Sr.'s mission on Dec. 31, 1972, when he was killed in a plane crash while ferrying aid to earthquake victims there. Clemente Jr. postponed the Nicaragua trip and flew 16,000 pounds of supplies from Puerto Rico to Asia. Said Clemente, "I decided . . . to help the people who desperately need it right now."

Go Figure

0 Running backs who gained 100 yards against Alabama this season.

2 Minnesota backs who went over 100 yards—Marion Barber III (187) and Laurence Maroney (105)—against the Tide in the Music City Bowl.

$1,800 Amount David and Victoria Beckham paid a butler to help unwrap their family's Christmas gifts.

121.1 Peyton Manning's passer rating this season, an NFL record.

$222 million Value of the Cavaliers as assessed by *Forbes* in February 2003, before the team drafted LeBron James.

$375 million Price Dan Gilbert agreed to pay for the Cavs on Monday.

11.0 Season rating for *Monday Night Football*, the lowest in the show's 35 years.

GETTY IMAGES (BROADBRIDGE); COURTESY OF TRISHA BROADBRIDGE VIA MELBOURNE FOOTBALL CLUB (WEDDING); WALTER IOOSS JR. (SI COVER)

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For the Record

Died Of emphysema at age 89, former major league pitcher and umpire Ken Burkhart. The righthander was 18–8 with a 2.90 ERA as a Cardinals rookie in 1945, but an elbow injury limited him to nine more wins before he hung up his spikes in '49. Burkhart became an NL ump in '57 and worked six All-Star Games and three World Series, including one in which he made a highly controversial call. In Game 1 of the '70 Series, Burkhart got tangled up with Baltimore catcher Elrod Hendricks and Cincinnati's Bernie Carbo, who was trying to score *(above)*. Burkhart was spun around and, with his back to the play, called Carbo out. (Baltimore won the game 4–3 and took the Series in five games.) Although replays showed Hendricks tagged Carbo with an empty glove, Burkhart stood by his call. "I was tough," he said in 2004. "I did not take anything from anybody."

Renamed The Anaheim Angels, as the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. The team made the switch in an effort to expand its appeal beyond Orange County, but it runs the risk of alienating its hometown base: The city of Anaheim says it will file a lawsuit to get Los Angeles dropped from the name on the grounds that the change violates the team's lease with the city. Anaheim spokesman Joe Nicoletti called the new name "geographically confusing and absurd."

Sentenced To 18 months' probation for DUI, six-time Olympic gold medalist Michael Phelps, 19. The swimmer was pulled over by police after driving through a stop sign in Salisbury, Md., in November. After initially denying he had been drinking, he pleaded guilty and was ordered by the judge to abstain from drinking for the duration of his probation and to give three speeches about the dangers of alcohol to students. Said Phelps, "I've learned from this mistake and will continue learning from this mistake for the rest of my life."

Surrendered To Tampa police, Rodney Roman, who is accused of killing Vanderbilt running back Kwane Doster, 21, early on Dec. 26. Doster, the 2002 SEC Freshman of the Year, was shot after he and a group of friends got into an argument with another group of men over who had a nicer car. Roman, 28, was charged with first-degree murder and two counts of attempted murder. His lawyer says, "They got the wrong guy."

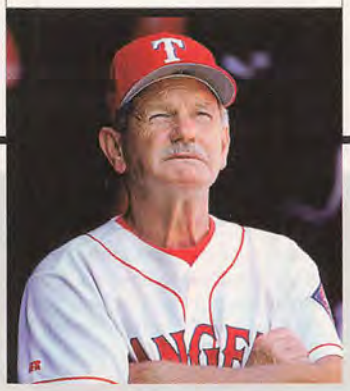
Foiled By World Series of Poker champion Greg Raymer, a robbery attempt by two men who attacked him at a casino. As the heavyset former patent attorney—who was carrying $150,000 in chips—went to his room following a game at the Bellagio in Las Vegas last month, the men tried to push him inside. Raymer, 40, who won the $5 million World Series last May, fought them off, even after one of the men pulled a gun. The pair fled. On a poker website after the incident Raymer wrote, "I don't write this to brag, I just want any robbery-minded people out there who hear about this to know that I'm a tough mark."

Awarded To 11 members of the 2003 Tampa Bay Storm, ArenaBowl championship rings made with fake diamonds. Six of the 11 signed with other teams as free agents following the season, and last week they filed a grievance with the players' association. The rings, which contain five cubic zirconia stones, are worth approximately $400 less than the $2,500 diamond rings most Tampa Bay players received.

Fight to the Finish

After a three-year battle, cancer claims the Rangers' most successful manager

THERE WERE times when Johnny Oates could be tense and tightly wound, no different from any other antacid-gobbling skipper; this was a man, after all, who once lost 16 pounds when his Orioles went on a four-game losing streak. But the 750 people who gathered in Colonial Heights, Va., last week at a memorial for Oates, who died at 58 on Dec. 24 after a three-year battle with a brain tumor, remembered a man of intense faith and preternatural inner peace. "He was more like a father figure than a manager," said former Rangers pitcher Jeff Zimmerman. "There was more than just baseball to him."



FATHER FIGURE Oates led the Rangers to their only division titles.

Oates played 11 seasons as a light-hitting catcher for five teams, then managed Baltimore (1991–94) and Texas (1995–2001). He went 797–746 and led the Rangers to their only three postseason appearances but resigned early in a difficult 2001 season. Later that year he was diagnosed with brain cancer. Given less than a year to live, Oates survived to see his daughter Jenny get married in 2002 and to see himself inducted into the Rangers' Hall of Fame in '03. "My days are filled with faith, hope, spirit and the small pleasures that many people take for granted," he wrote in *The Sporting News* in April 2002. "Whatever time I have left, I want it to mean something."

TONY TRIOLO (BURKHART); STEFANIE BOYAR/ST. PETERSBURG TIMES (RING); DARREN CARROLL (OATES)

The Show

By Bill Scheft

GOOD TO BE BACK. Arbitrator Roger Kaplan cut my time off from 20 days to two weeks.

Steinbrenner still writing "2004" on checks Did you see New Year's Eve in Times Square? Little different this year. At midnight they dropped Randy Johnson's contract into a vault.

Nice deal for Arizona. In exchange for the Big Unit, the D-Backs got Javier Vazquez and two minor leaguers from the Yankees and 25 brand-new dirt bikes from Oprah.

Is it me, or was the last homegrown prospect to stick in the Yankees' locker room Jason Giambi's and Kevin Brown's intestinal parasite?

San Francisco acquired free-agent closer Armando Benitez. In a related story the Elias Sports Bureau is developing a new statistic: wind-blown saves.

I'm worried about Billy Beane. First, he trades away Tim Hudson and Mark Mulder, now he says the only agent he'll deal with is Arliss.

Texas a-maizes Michigan in Rose Bowl Or should that be the Yellow Rose Bowl?

There were so many outstanding offensive plays on both sides, Keith Jackson ran out of down-home lingo and had to call Dan Rather.

Elsewhere, Iowa scored as time expired to beat LSU in the Capital One Bowl. Nick Saban may have been distracted. At one point he tried to replace Marcus Randall with Sage Rosenfels.

Just wondering. Who do you think was overhyped more during Bowl Week, Jennifer Garner or Cal?

The Associated Press announced it was dropping out of the BCS. It will be replaced by Paula Abdul.

Seriously, the AP should be replaced by AAA. Every year the BCS is an accident waiting to happen.

Four NFL playoff spots decided in Week 17 Or as it's known to the Saints, the buh-bye week.

The Rams finished 8–8 and made the playoffs on a little-known tiebreaker: record in office shouting matches.

Jets QB Chad Pennington may be starting to crack. During the last three press conferences he's worn a red jersey so the media can't hit him.

Monday Night Football finished with the lowest ratings in its 35-year history. ABC is thinking about renaming it *Lost . . . Viewers.*

Injuries plaguing NBA stars Are you like me? Were you worried doctors were going to reset the broken bone in LeBron James's cheek to look like a Nike swoosh?

Shaquille O'Neal is trying to protect his sore ribs. I believe the last time Shaq had to wear a flak jacket was just before the reviews came out for *Kazaam.*

Knicks guard Jamal Crawford may miss six weeks with turf toe. Turf toe? In the NBA? What, did he stub it on Elgin Baylor's head?

And call me skeptical, but I won't believe Karl Malone hit on Vanessa Bryant until he buys Kobe an eight-carat diamond.

Meanwhile, the Hornets traded guard David Wesley to the Rockets. Technically, I believe this is known as a cellar's market.

Yasser Arafat invested more than $1 million in bowling alley And I thought I was the only one who was profoundly influenced by *The Big Lebowski.*

Michael Phelps gets 18 months' probation for DUI This is nice. He'll serve 16 months, then step aside and let Ian Crocker take the last leg.

My time is up. You've been great. Enjoy Zager and Evans.

Bill Scheft tied for 3rd Low Gross Thread Count at the Tommy Bahama Challenge.

Q+A

Hilary Swank

The 30-year-old Academy Award winner stars opposite director Clint Eastwood in *Million Dollar Baby*

SI: To play a boxer you trained 4½ hours a day, six days a week for three months and gained 19 pounds of muscle. Would you advise that regimen for couch potatoes?

Swank: I'd recommend them warming up to it. Boxing was physically the hardest thing I've ever done. Ever.

SI: Describe your character's relationship with boxing.

Swank: For Maggie, boxing is her dream. It's a calling, and I also think it's an escape. It's a way out.

SI: How long did it take to get used to hitting and being hit?

Swank: I felt protected because [trainer] Hector Roca would let people hit me only in the body until I got used to moving around. Gradually we got to letting people hit me in the face. Then it was a different game, and it made me better. I got the hang of hitting and being hit, and I enjoyed it. I remember bloodying my first nose. I was like, "Yeah!"

SI: You fight pro boxer Lucia Rijker in one of the film's most important scenes. How intimidating was it?

Swank: She was really supportive, giving me tips and pointers. She would never go all out because she would kill me. If she wanted to remind me that I'm not really a boxer, I'm sure it would have been hell.

SI: You were nominated for a Golden Globe for best actress. How would you feel about your chances if the award were decided in the ring?

Swank: As long as it wasn't against Lucia Rijker, I might be able to hold my own *(laughs).*

SI: You have an age advantage on Imelda Staunton and better reach than Scarlett Johannson. Uma Thurman may be tough, though.

Swank: That's very interesting. You'd like to see that, wouldn't you? Me and Uma Thurman in the ring.

—Richard Deitsch

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN HENDRIX; ANDREEA ANGELESCU/KEYSTONE PRESS/ZUMA PRESS INC. (SWANK); COURTESY OF LAKESHORE ENTERTAINMENT/ZUMA PRESS INC. (SWANK BOXING)

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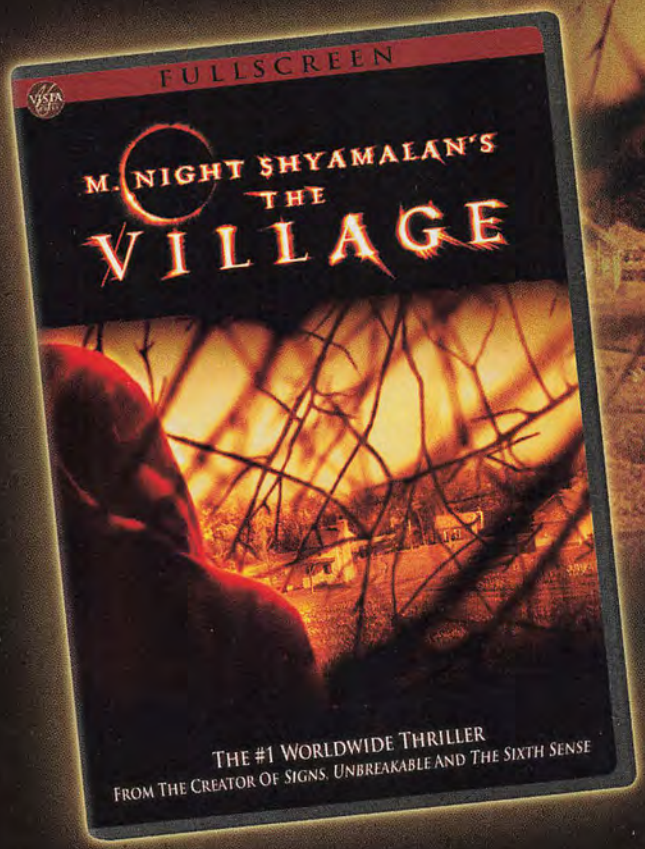

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The Beat

By Lisa Altobelli

RED SOX centerfielder **Johnny Damon** walked down the aisle to the **Brooks & Dunn** song *Brand New Man*, but he had the same old scruffy beard and long hair for his marriage to **Michelle Mangan** at the Ritz-Carlton in Orlando last Thursday. Several of Damon's fellow Boston "idiots" were among the 175 guests, including **Kevin Millar, Mike Timlin, Doug Mientkiewicz, Bronson Arroyo, Kevin Youkilis** and **Keith Foulke**, whose wife, **Mandy**, was a bridesmaid. The couple *(left)* kept their guests busy. On Tuesday the men played golf and the women received spa treatments. That night everyone enjoyed a performance by *SNL*'s **Seth Meyers**, and the next day Damon went fishing with 40 buddies. "It kind of stinks for people to come into town for one day, so we put together a bunch of stuff," Damon told *The Boston Globe*.

■ **Carmelo Anthony**'s pals hope he paid attention to the party the Damons threw because the Nuggets' star has nuptials of his own to plan. Anthony, 20, capped a tumultuous year—which has included a dropped drug possession charge and an appearance on a DVD in which another man threatens those who tip police about drug deals—by proposing to MTV veejay **La La Vasquez**, 25, on Christmas. Melo gave his girl a nine-carat diamond ring; no date has been set.

■ LSU football coach **Nick Saban** is headed for a new home (with the Dolphins) and so is **Mike the Tiger**, the school's 15-year-old Bengal tiger mascot. LSU is building a $3 million, 15,000-square-foot tiger habitat with a waterfall, oak trees and an Italianate stone tower. Mike's new digs, which will be located outside of Tiger Stadium's north end zone, should be ready by September. "Mike the Tiger's habitat is one of the most visited sites in all of Baton Rouge," says Tiger Athletic Foundation spokesman **Herb Vincent**. "People want to see him taken care of."

■ The animal rights group PETA hooked a Worm last week when **Dennis Rodman** agreed to pose for the organization's I'd Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur campaign. Rodman recently met PETA vice president **Dan Matthews** at a South Beach nightclub, and he was persuaded to join the cause when Matthews explained that PETA donates thousands of fur coats to the homeless—a cause close to Rodman's heart since his foundation gives aid to the homeless. "He said that furriers have pushed free furs on him over the years, and he's always refused," said Matthews. "He said that he was always embarrassed when an ex-wife wore furs."... Sonics president **Wally Walker** had a special guest on Seattle's road swing last week: **Bruce Hornsby**. The singer performed at his old pal's 50th birthday party last summer, and Walker repaid the favor by letting Hornsby travel with the team to Atlanta, Miami and Charlotte, where Hornsby sat next to North Carolina coach **Roy Williams** at courtside on New Year's Eve.

PICTURE THIS Glasgow University researchers caused a stir in Britain last month with a report that heading soccer balls can cause brain damage. Plays like this one probably aren't good for the ol' noggin either. Gillingham's Ian Cox was leveled by Sunderland forward Chris Brown during a Coca-Cola Championship match in England on Monday. Somehow Cox was unhurt, and Brown scored the Black Cats' lone goal in a 1–1 draw.

THIS WEEK'S SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

English rugby star Lewis Moody missed the first game after the holidays because he said he'd hurt himself "repeatedly shaking hands over the festive period."

They Said It

ARTURS IRBE

Latvia-born Hurricanes goalie, on the NHL owners' negotiating tactics: "They take a shove-it-up-your-throat kind of approach."

MICHAEL STEELE/GETTY IMAGES (PICTURE THIS); ANDY MEAD/ICON SMI (IRBE); JENNIFER ABELSON (TIGER); JOHN UNRUE/WEDDINGS UNIQUE (DAMON WEDDING)

The Week Ahead

What to watch and watch for **By Julia Morrill**

FRIDAY 7

***SportsCentury: Bevo Francis* ESPN Classic 8 p.m.** | Bevo who? In 1953 the kid from Rio Grande College set an NCAA record that still stands: 113 points in a game. Says Francis, "I wasn't a movie star, but there was a time when everyone in the country knew my name."

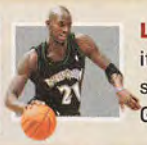
SATURDAY 8

Purina Incredible Dog Challenge NBC 3 p.m. | More than 60 canines square off in hurdle races, flying disk catching and diving. **NFL Playoffs, Jets at Chargers ABC 8 p.m.** | New York won 34–28 in Week 2—two weeks before San Diego went on an 11–2 tear.

SUNDAY 9

Happy Birthday! | Muggsy Bogues turns 40. The 5′ 3″ guard averaged 7.6 assists over 14 years and now wants to get into TV. **Mercedes Championship ESPN 7 p.m.** | Tiger Woods and Vijay Singh kick off the PGA Tour season at Maui's Kapalua Plantation Course.

MONDAY 10



Lakers at Timberwolves NBATV 8 p.m. | Last year they fought it out in the conference finals; this year they're fighting it out for sixth place in the West. But some things haven't changed—Kevin Garnett is again the league's leading rebounder.

TUESDAY 11

No. 19 Alabama at Arkansas ESPN 9 p.m. | The Razorbacks blew through their cream-puff nonconference slate. Now they get a real test in the Tide, which has three players—Earnest Shelton, Kennedy Winston, Chuck Davis—averaging more than 16 points.

WEDNESDAY 12

Winter Revolution OLN 9 p.m. | World Cup leader Bode Miller prepares for the 2006 Olympics. **No. 9 Georgia Tech at No. 3 North Carolina ESPN 7 p.m.** | The Yellow Jackets, coming off a tough OT loss to No. 2 Kansas, look to rebound in a huge ACC matchup.

THURSDAY 13

Snowmobile Hall of Fame Induction | The first family of snowmobiling, the Wahls, see brothers Dave and Durmont inducted in Eagle River, Wis. **Nets at Rockets TNT 8 p.m.** | With Vince Carter, who is averaging 22.3 points as a Net, 11–18 New Jersey is 2–2.

AP (FRANCIS); MEL LEVINE (HAT); KENT SMITH/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (BOGUES); OTTO GREULE JR/GETTY IMAGES (WINSTON); JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES (SNOWMOBILING); MATTEO BAZZI/EPA (MILLER); JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES (GARNETT); CRAIG MOORE-GWINNETT DAILY POST/AP (DOG)

Under Review

He grew up in the Jim Crow South, and when Jack Johnson entered the ring, whites jeered. But he paid them no mind, flashed a gold-toothed smile and, with fast hands and an impenetrable defense, became, on Dec. 26, 1908, the first African-American heavyweight champion of the world. Outside the ring Johnson flew in the face of mainstream America, speeding down highways in custom-made cars and consorting with white women. His attitude eventually got him busted on a morals charge, and he spent 10 months in prison. With raw material like this, Ken Burns, the filmmaker who gave us *The Civil War*, *Baseball* and *Jazz*, could hardly have made a dull movie, but with his 3½-hour *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (PBS, Jan. 17 and 18), he has given us a very long and, at times, slow one that could use more of Johnson's stick-and-move style. Burns's trademark pans over still photographs evoke early-20th-century America, and Samuel L. Jackson's reading of Johnson's writings and statements is effective, but best of all is the ancient fight footage, which shows a boxer of unsurpassed skill. When Johnson fought Tommy Burns in '08, Jack London wrote, "Burns never landed a blow. A dewdrop had more chance in hell than he with the giant Ethiopian." —*Nancy Ramsey*

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Faces in the Crowd

DeVon Fowlkes

FORT WAYNE, IND. > Football

Fowlkes, a senior wide receiver at Appalachian State, had 103 receptions, 1,618 receiving yards and 2,313 all-purpose yards, all Southern Conference records. He was a finalist for the Walter Payton Award, given to the top Division I-AA offensive player (won by William & Mary's Lang Campbell).

Erin Budd

DELMAR, DEL. > Field Hockey

Budd, a senior back at Salisbury, scored seven game-winning goals as she led her 22–0 team to a second straight NCAA Division III championship. She also set school records for assists in a season (17) and in a career (44) as the Sea Gulls ended the year on a 33-game winning streak.

Christie Zinanti

PUEBLO, COLO. > Softball

Christie, a junior righthander at Pueblo West High, helped the 20–3 Cyclones win the state Class 4A championship. She finished the season with 287 strikeouts in 149 innings and an 0.05 ERA, and was named Class 4A and All-Colorado pitcher of the year.

Gary Kane

LANSDALE, PA. > Soccer

Kane, a senior goalkeeper at Johns Hopkins, set team and Centennial Conference records for fewest goals allowed (five), most shutouts (14) and best goals-against average (0.25) in 20 starts. He was named the 2004 conference player of the year.

Julian Wright

FLOSSMOOR, ILL. > Basketball

Julian, a senior forward at Homewood-Flossmoor High, sank two free throws with seven seconds left to give the Vikings a 68–67 upset win over Oak Hill Academy, the nation's No. 1 team. He leads the 12–2 Vikings with 14.5 points and 12.0 rebounds per game.

Natasha Kai

KAHUKU-OAHU, HAWAII > Soccer

Kai, a junior striker at Hawaii, led the Rainbow Wahine with 12 goals and five assists for 29 points. Seven of her goals were game-winners, including three in overtime. She holds more than a dozen school and Western Athletic Conference records.

To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, go to **SI.com/faces.**

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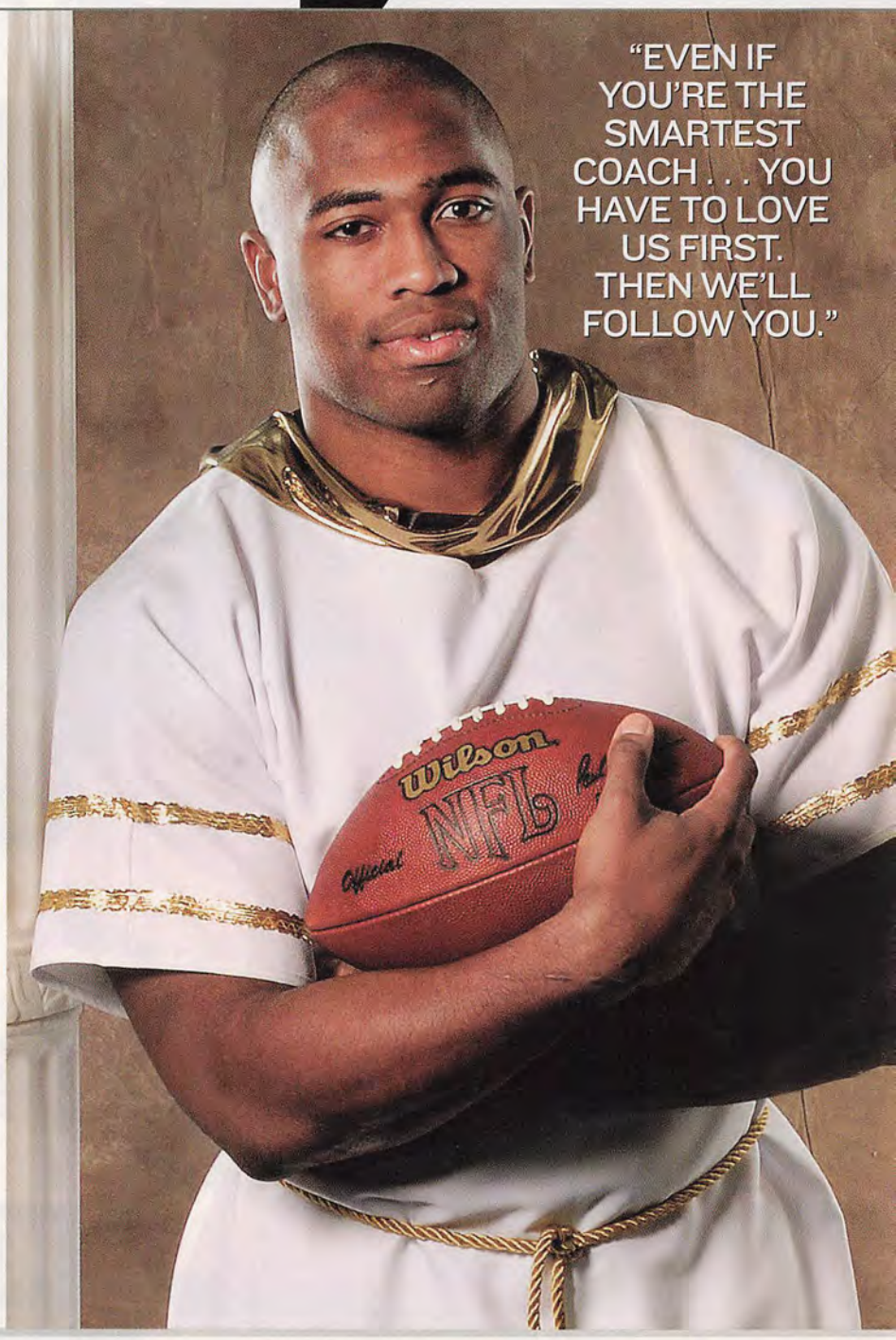
SI Players

• FIRST PERSON

SHAUN ALEXANDER

Seahawks Running Back



• ON HOW HE BECAME A RUNNING BACK One time in pee-wee, I scored two TDs on kickoff returns, but we lost 38–12. People were telling me I had a good game, and I realized that was because of the TDs. When I figured out that the running back scores the most, I said, 'That's what I want to be.'

• ON SCORING That's the only goal. If I have 200 yards rushing and no TDs, that's failure. Just failure.

• ON VISITING TUSCALOOSA, WHERE HE SET ALABAMA RUSHING RECORDS OF 3,565 YARDS AND 41 TDS FROM 1996 TO '99 If I go out in public, I have to have someone with me. People come up and say, 'Hey, you make me an NFL fan.' That's humbling, because the South is about college football. By the end of the conversation, there'll be a crowd wanting autographs. There could be 1,000 people there, waiting.

• ON HIS WIFE OF NEARLY THREE YEARS, VALERIE She balances me out. Sometimes I'm too laid-back, and she fires things up. We have a group of friends we meet with, and we broke ourselves down into one of four personality types. I scored as an otter—a carefree guy who lets things roll off his back and doesn't get deeply involved with many people. Val scored as a lion: Lions control the show, or at least think they control the show. At home, if I try to cook a meal, I'll hear it from her. 'Did you use this ingredient? Did you cook it this long?' I just say, 'Taste it. If it tastes good, I did fine.'

• ON SEATTLE AND THE SEAHAWKS People tell me this is a football town. But if you have to keep insisting that it is, well. . . . At Boone County High in Kentucky we would get more than 10,000 people a week. People would come from out of state to watch us play. Tailgating started at four o'clock for a Friday night game. My sophomore year at Alabama, we were 4–7, on probation,

 PHOTOGRAPH BY RICH FRISHMAN

Edited by
KOSTYA KENNEDY

"You've got all this open space, and you're just free. All the tension is gone."
—TONY DORSETT, FORMER COWBOY RB, *Seeing Daylight, page 32*

and the stadium was packed. When you say 'football town,' that's what I compare it to.

• **ON KEEPING THE FAITH** One day at church when I was 10, the pastor was screaming. An old lady was rocking in her seat, and a guy was crying. The choir was moonwalking in the aisles. They were all saying, 'Thank you Jesus.' I said, 'Mom, I need to know who this Jesus is.' For me, it's still about learning who he really is, falling in love with him every day.

• **ON HIS RUNNING STYLE** I'm deceptive. I can look like I'm chillin', and be haulin'. And I can look like I'm haulin', and be chillin'.

• **ON HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH COACH MIKE HOLMGREN, WHOM HE GOT MAD AT FOR NOT GIVING HIM THE BALL WHEN HE HAD A SHOT AT THE NFL RUSHING TITLE ON SUNDAY** We got it figured out this season. I've been playing Coach H's game, but he's been letting my personality and my style flow. It's been a process. When I first got here, I was judgmental about Coach. I had been treated well by my high school coaches, then Gene Stallings. All these coaches were into me. Coach H was different. I thought, I'll keep my distance because I don't know how he's going to act. Instead of just loving him—saying, O.K., Coach, that's how you are? That's cool—I was judging, wary. When Coach came here, he was called the Genius, and I think he was shocked the team didn't fall in behind him right away. The thing with this generation of players is that even if you're the smartest coach in history—and Coach H is right there—you have to love us first. Then we'll follow you.

• **ON HIS NICKNAMES** In high school it was Mr. Touchdown. At Alabama, the Icon. But my favorite is one not many people know. Two years ago our D-linemen were saying how I hit the hole and disappear. I hit the line, and they can't find me, I'm gone. They started calling me the Ghost. 'It's the Ghost!' they'd cry. It stuck. I really like that one. *—As told to Josh Elliott*

ALEXANDER THE GREAT LED THE NFC WITH 1,696 RUSHING YARDS AND 20 TDS. SEATTLE HOSTS ST. LOUIS ON SATURDAY.

WHO'S Hot

Doug Flutie

Will his minimarvels never cease? At 42, 20 years after winning the Heisman at Boston College, the 5' 10" ex-USFL, ex-CFL, Chargers QB made what may be his last NFL start. "It was fun to go out and play with the kids again," he said after running for a TD, passing for another and assuring San Diego that it has some sweet playoff insurance behind Drew Brees.

Miami

Despite a sore-ribbed Shaq, Heat (behind smokin' point guard Dwyane Wade, *left*) reeled off a three-week winning streak. And—Happy New Year!—Hurricanes stomped rival Florida in Peach Bowl and started crowing about a national title *next* season, while Dolphins, new coach on the way, at last closed out nightmarish '04.

Mike Martz

One week after his Rams whipped the Eagles and gave him the game ball, the coach presided over a playoff-saving win over Jets, and players rallied to support their maligned leader. "He's a piñata to you guys," St. Louis lineman Tyoka Jackson told reporters. "[But] for everybody in here [that's] a joke."

Steelers

Before Sunday's kickoff, police snagged three men who'd allegedly taken $63,000 in goods from WR Plaxico Burress's town house. Then Pittsburgh's backups stole win in Buffalo and became, in the words of exultant RB Duce Staley, "15–1, baby!"—the only AFC team ever to do so.

Vincents

Vince Carter's averaged 22 points while reviving Nets; Texas QB Vincent Young engineered Rose Bowl win; Steelers guard Keydrick Vincent, in career season, is up for free agency; and Vince McMahon took WWE Smackdown! to Iraq for troops' holiday fun.

WHO'S Not

Eddie George

Fox's studio yakker Terry Bradshaw gave George one of his Time to Hang It Up awards and TB's ESPN counterpart Michael Irvin cited George as the biggest disappointment of 2004—and those guys may be right. At 31 he started just eight games for Dallas, was a healthy scratch for the first time and, on Sunday, ran for two yards while his heir apparent, Julius Jones, broke loose for 149.

Michigan

As Pistons trailed Cavs in NBA Central, Lions ended once-promising season with drubbing by Titans. And Wolverines' last-second Rose Bowl defeat wasn't state's only loss to Texas: Detroit rocker Ted Nugent's moved there and says he'll officially become a Texan—driver's license and all—in '05.

Matt Cavanaugh

Ravens offensive coordinator's season of poor production (NFL's 31st-ranked offense) led to his resignation under pressure after Monday meeting with coach Brian Billick. With Snowplow Game holder *(page 30)* gone, Billick may bring in old pal and 2004 Ravens consultant Jim Fassel as a replacement.

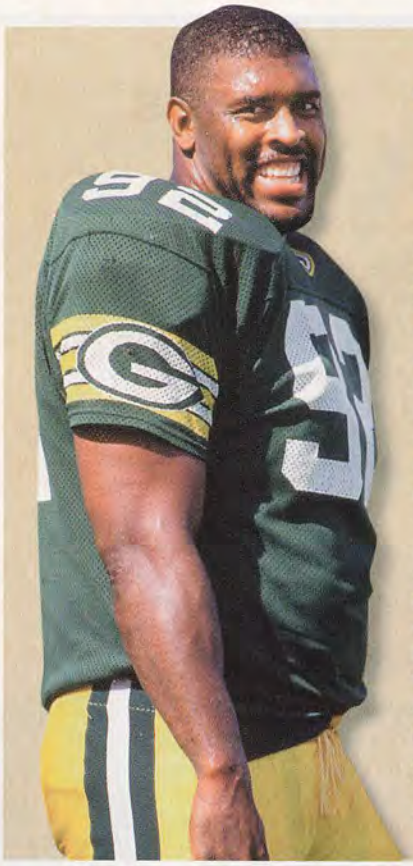
Happy Endings

Compelling runs by Bills (won 8 of 9) and Julius Pepper's Panthers (6 of 7) ended in losses that cost playoffs. ("I'm a bit in shock," said Bills QB Drew Bledsoe.) Even the comeback team that won—the Saints, their fourth straight—was shut out of postseason after gathering in locker room to watch Rams edge past Jets in OT.

Randy Moss

Yes, the Vikes backed into the playoffs—not that Moss was there to see it. He skulked off field before final play in loss to Redskins. Meanwhile the child of a hotel housekeeper in West Virginia is on eBay peddling Moss's socks found left behind in room.

DAVID GONZALES/ICON SMI (ALEXANDER ACTION); AL MESSERSCHMIDT/WIREIMAGE.COM (DORSETT); GREGORY R. BANNER/WIREIMAGE.COM (FLUTIE); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (WADE); GARRETT ELLWOOD/WIREIMAGE.COM (BURRESS); AGGIE SKIRBALL/WIREIMAGE.COM (GEORGE); TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES (NUGENT); BOB ROSATO (PEPPERS)



● TRIBUTE

Remembering Reggie

Defensive end Reggie White, who died Dec. 26 of a respiratory ailment at age 43, played 15 NFL seasons for the Eagles, Packers and Panthers, made 13 straight Pro Bowls, twice was named the NFL's Defensive Player of the Year and won Super Bowl XXXI with Green Bay in 1997. He was also a Baptist minister who helped inner-city children but at times angered people with derogatory remarks about gays and women. Last week he was recalled, as a football player and a teammate, for his generosity, his passion and his locker-room pranks.

Lions coach **STEVE MARIUCCI** was Green Bay's quarterbacks coach from 1992 to '95 and invited Reggie and his wife, Sara, to dinner. "My boys were three, five and seven, and they wanted to play football with Reggie," Mariucci recalls. "He was tired from practice, but he said, 'Of course. Let's go.' He told them to get their friends for a game in the yard. There must have been a dozen kids. Reggie played quarterback for both teams, and I asked him to throw one to my youngest, Stephen. *Boom!* The pass hit Stephen in the nose. Stephen was really crying, mad. Reggie tried to console him and picked him up. *Whammo!* Stephen smacked him in the face with his elbow. Then he got down and ran into the house. Reggie spent the entire evening trying to get Stephen back on board. All night long Reggie tried to tickle him and giggle with him and make amends. Finally, after a couple hours, they were wrestling on the floor and having a good old time. Reggie was a big kid. " . . . Former Cardinals running back **RON WOLFLEY** recalls an exchange between Cardinals QB **NEIL LOMAX** and White: After

● WHERE IS IT NOW?

The Pats' Naughty Snowplow

FOR 22 YEARS the story of the Snowplow Game has held a special place in the hearts of Patriots fans. On Dec. 12, 1982, a frigid day at Schaefer Stadium in Foxborough, Mass., the Patriots and the Dolphins were tied 0–0 with 4:45 left when the Pats called time before attempting a 33-yard field goal. Suddenly a tractor with a broom attached (though it has gone into NFL lore as a "plow" the appendage was actually a sweeper, which was effective on artificial turf) chugged onto the snow-covered field *(below right)* and cleared a four-foot-wide swath leading up to where Matt Cavanaugh was to hold for kicker John Smith. (The tractor was driven by Mark Henderson, a convicted burglar out of prison on a work-release program and working on the Pats' grounds crew.) Smith drilled the ball just over the crossbar, and New England won 3–0 over the protests of Dolphins coach Don Shula, who was on the NFL's competition committee. The next spring the league ruled that refs could not let groundskeepers clear snow before a kick.

The broom was retired when the Pats switched from turf to grass in 1991, but it made a heralded reappearance at New England's final regular-season game at the old stadium, in 2001. Henderson, who was released from prison in the early '80s, got a standing ovation when he drove the tractor and broom onto the field to reenact the '82 scene. The Patriots use the same tractor to tow things like tarps and watercoolers, but the broom (reunited with the tractor, *below left*) rests in a storage room in the bowels of Gillette Stadium. "No one had the heart to get rid of it," says Jim Nolan, the vice president of operations for Gillette Stadium. "To us it's a historical artifact." —*Lisa Altobelli*

JOHN BIEVER (WHITE); V.J. LOVERO (BLEDSOE); MIKE KULLEN/AP (HENDERSON ON TRACTOR); DAMIAN STROHMEYER (TRACTOR)

sacking Lomax, White looked down at him and said, "Neil, Jesus loves you." Lomax replied, "I know. But what's your problem?" . . . "The first time I saw Reggie play, in 1985, I said, 'This guy will be in the Hall of Fame,' " says Packers offensive line coach **LARRY BEIGHTOL**. "He was a phenom. Bigger, stronger, faster. The guy who did the best job on him was a rookie I had in Green Bay [White was with Carolina] named **MARK TAUSCHER**. After the game Reggie came into our locker room and congratulated Tausch on a fine job. Another time, when I was with the Chargers, he came across the field and said, 'Coach, I would highly recommend that your players stop cutting me. If they don't, I'm going to have to take it out on you.' I immediately told the boys, 'Do not touch Reggie's legs any longer.' " . . . Former NFL safety **EUGENE ROBINSON** played with White in Green Bay and Carolina and was a pallbearer at his funeral (as were other NFLers: Below are Michael Perry, left foreground; Brett Favre, center; and Adrian Murrell, right). "He was always playing practical jokes with the hot and cold in the shower," said Robinson. "Then he would take a big wad of soap and, after you'd dried off, slap you in the back. You'd have to go back and wash off again. Reggie was funny. He had a lot of mama jokes. One time the train comes by the Carolina camp. We heard this big screech, *Urgggggh*. He said, '**DOUG [EVANS**, a Panthers CB], that's your mama. She just jumped off the back of the train, and she's holding on to the caboose, and she's skiing now.' The way he said it, every last one of us was crying laughing. He said Doug's mama was so fat she was holding on, making this noise, *Urgggggh*. That's Reggie White."

● **BODY ART**

Tale of My Tattoo

TANK JOHNSON
BEARS DT

THE ROOKIE'S right calf has a map of Indiana earmarking Gary, where he lived until age 10. "Gary's impoverished, tough, hard-nosed," says Johnson. "The tattoo shows my struggle." Johnson was living with his father, Terry, in Arizona when he got the tattoo at 15. "I had to leave Gary because of all the drugs and the crime in the city. I needed a fresh start. But Gary still bleeds in me. At the NFL combine I rubbed my tattoo. Then I ran the best time of any defensive tackle."

JARRETT PAYTON
TITANS RB

"DAD HAD pictures of himself everywhere," says the 24-year-old son of the late Walter Payton. "You saw this one when you walked into the house. We called it the 'take off your shoes' picture." Jarrett, who's on the practice squad, had the portrait done after Walter died of cancer in '99 "I had one on my back with the sun and a WP in it, but I wanted his face somewhere. On my left shoulder are my mom [Connie]'s initials, and my sister, Brittney, is in there. My family is everywhere on me."

LARRY FOOTE
STEELERS LB

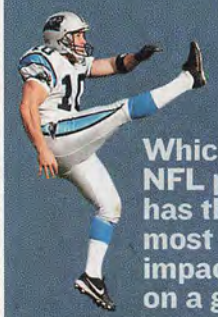
FOOTE IS one of three players with this acronym on his chest: J is for Raiders RB Justin Fargas, D is for Bears WR David Terrell, L is for Larry. The three were teammates at Michigan from '98 to 2000. "Every summer we work out together," says Terrell. "We're best friends, we'll be best men at each other's wedding." The players say they'll add to the tattoo if they ever all make it to the Pro Bowl. In any event Foote vows the tattoo will never get covered up. Like the art says, "It's untouchable. For life."

JOHN BIEVER (WHITE ON BIKE); TODD SUMLIN/THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER/AP (WHITE FUNERAL); WILLIAM R. SMITH (JOHNSON, 2); DONN JONES (PAYTON, 2); MIKE FABUS (FOOTE, 2); ROBERT B. STANTON/WIREIMAGE.COM (SAUERBRUN); CRAIG MELVIN/US PRESSWIRE (THOMAS)

SI PLAYERS POLL

[Based on a survey of 354 players]

For complete results and a breakdown of the poll go to SI.com/scorecard.



Which NFL punter has the most impact on a game?

Todd Sauerbrun **22%**
Panthers (above)
Shane Lechler **18%**
Raiders
Darren Bennett **15%**
Vikings
Craig Hentrich **14%**
Titans

Who is the NFL's best defensive special teams player?

Adalius Thomas **15%**
***Ravens LB** (above, right)*
Larry Izzo **13%**
Patriots LB
Alex Bannister **12%**
Seahawks WR
Ian Gold **8%**
Bucs LB

FAST FACTS: Lechler led the NFL with a 46.7-yard gross punting average. . . . Bennett was next-to-last at 39.3, but he is the only one of the top five vote-getters to reach the playoffs. . . . Among the top special teams defenders, Thomas's teammate, safety Ed Reed, was seventh at 5%. . . . Gold and Bannister were the only NFC players in the top eight.

The Questions with Donnie Edwards

Chargers Linebacker

What was your welcome-to-the-NFL moment? My first year, the Thanksgiving Day game against the Lions. Barry Sanders was there. I didn't know if I should cover him or ask for an autograph.

Most embarrassing moment? This year against the Chiefs there was a screen play and [K.C. guard] Brian Waters came out of nowhere and knocked me off my feet. The guys on the team gave me crap. They said when he hit me, my feet were still moving in the air like I was still running. Like a cartoon. All I saw was blue sky.

Favorite off-day activity? Jumping on my Wave Runners with my brother Antwone. We ride out of San Diego Harbor, and it's so peaceful. The water is like glass, and the aircraft carriers are out there. My brother's crazier with the waves. I take it easy. I'm usually still sore from the game.

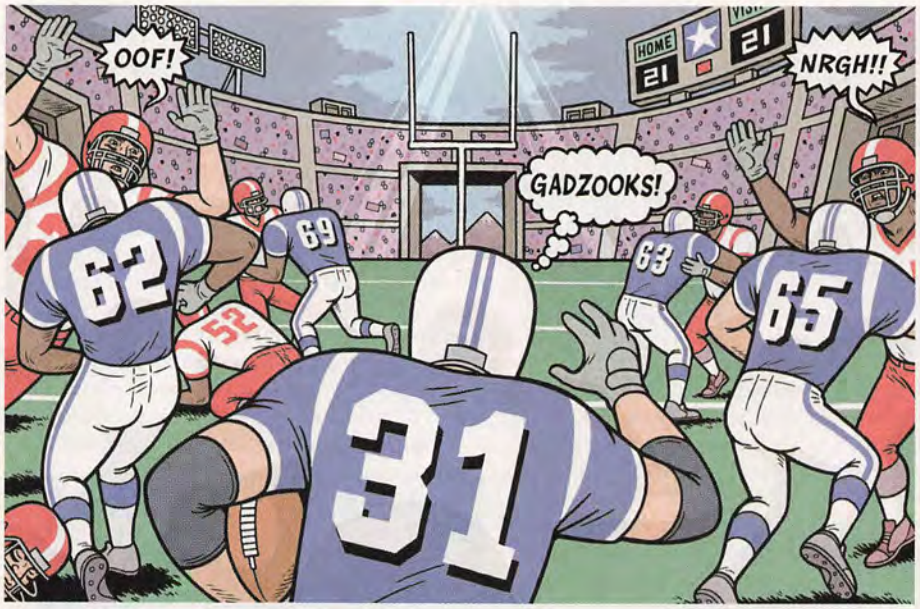
If I weren't in the NFL, I'd be . . . Holding public office. I'd like to be a congressman. I'm commissioner of the governor's After-School All-Stars program in San Diego. I know Arnold and Maria pretty well.

Last Week

Edwards had six tackles in a 24–17 win over the Chiefs.

This Week

Chargers host Jets on Saturday.



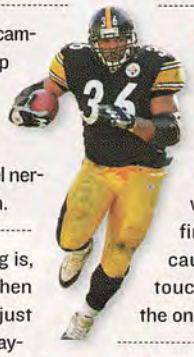
● **HOW DOES IT FEEL?**

Seeing Daylight

NFL runners (and a poet) talk about the moment when the field opens up

October Saturday: 1949
When I was 17,/the quarterback gave me the ball,
and/the hole opened/up, right where it said it would
be/on the blackboard./And I kept on going,
and going. I was an/x attached to an arrow. It was/like
making love/to a woman, although I must/admit, I
did/not know that at the time.
—H.R. Coursen, New and Selected Poems, 2002

>> JEROME BETTIS, *STEELERS* If you had a camera on the player, you'd see his eyes light up like he was getting a big prize. You go through a couple of different feelings. Initially, it's like walking into a surprise birthday party; you're stunned. Then, during the run, you feel nervous about getting caught and fear kicks in.



STEVEN JACKSON, *RAMS* The main thing is, you can't think about getting hit. That's when things tend to happen, like fumbles. You just need to react. Once you see that glimpse of daylight, it's a split-second decision where you tell yourself to hit it. If you don't, daylight closes.

<< DORSEY LEVENS, *EAGLES* I've never been to prison, but I would imagine it would feel like being released from jail—the gates just open.

TONY DORSETT, *HALL OF FAME COWBOY* When you get out in that open field, it's like a bird on a clear day. It has all that freedom to fly and go where it wants to go. That's the good feeling. You've just got all this open space, and you're just free. All the tension is gone because you've gotten away from everybody else, and you're free to float on and go do your own thing. You're in a zone. I couldn't even hear the crowd a lot of the times. I mean, I couldn't until I crossed that goal line.

CURTIS MARTIN, *JETS* Because they're so few and far between, the first thing that comes to mind is surprise. In the NFL everybody's so fast that you rarely get the room where you hit a hole and there's daylight. Usually the daylight comes with broken tackles, things like that. The first thing you think about is not getting caught. Then you think about scoring the touchdown. When I see daylight, those are the only thoughts that enter my mind.

>> COREY DILLON, *PATRIOTS* You get this weird feeling like a rush. Something comes over you. My first thought is to explode through and run as fast as I can. The impact of a tackle is the last thing I'm worrying about—the impact is not going to be that fierce. Adrenaline is just pushing you to the end zone. It's like you're running toward the light.

ILLUSTRATION BY DANNY HELLMAN; AL TIELEMANS (BETTIS); HEINZ KLUETMEIER (LEVENS); DAMIAN STROHMEYER (DILLON); GREG TROTT/WIREIMAGE.COM (EDWARDS); JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES (EDWARDS ACTION)

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WELL-HEALED White showed no ill effects from a bum ankle as he touched down for a first-quarter score that put the Trojans in the lead for good.

Without

After a thundering Orange Bowl victory, a young USC team has back-

Sports Illustrated

a Doubt

to-back national titles, 22 straight wins and the makings of a dynasty

BY AUSTIN MURPHY | *Photograph by* Damian Strohmeyer

ASHLEE SIMPSON had just finished belting out a halftime number called *La La* when a balmy night in South Florida turned suddenly cold. Lusty boos cascaded on the black-clad, acid-reflux-afflicted singer. Don't take it personally, Ashlee. Your critics at the Orange Bowl—some of them, anyway—were disgruntled Oklahoma fans who knew that your pal Casey Cobb was friendly with USC junior quarterback Matt Leinart. They were trying to get back at him any way they could. The Sooners' defense sure wasn't laying a glove on the guy. Seriously, were those Oklahoma's starters out there on Tuesday night? Reading coverages like a motorist studying a billboard, bouncing on the balls of his feet behind nearly flawless protection, Leinart completed 13 of 23 passes for four touchdowns and no interceptions. *In the first half.*

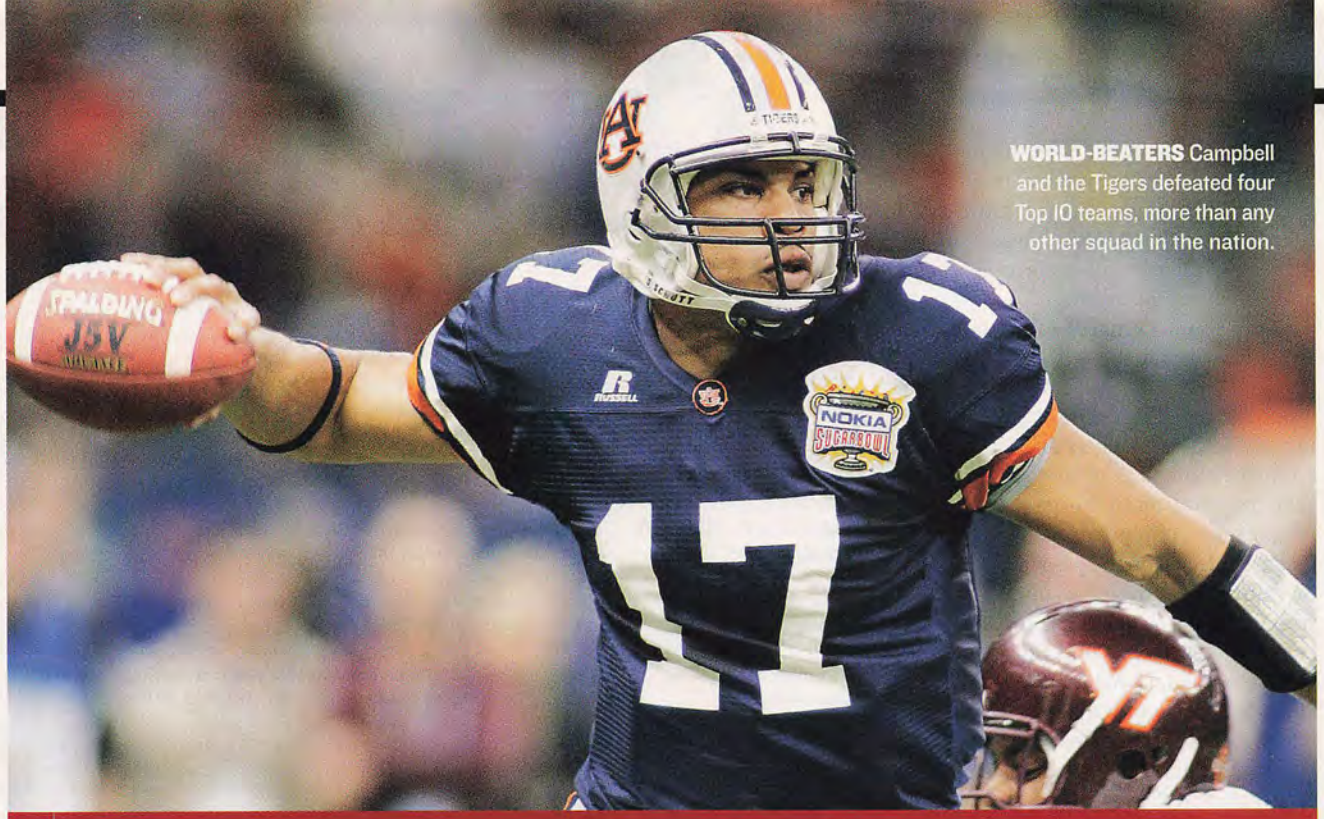
By then, of course, the game had been decided and millions of viewers had channel-surfed over to *The Amazing Race*. So comprehensive was Southern Cal's domination in this 55–19 rout, so cool and lethal was Leinart, so airtight and opportunistic was the defense, so elegant was the play-calling of offensive coordinator Norm Chow, that it seems mean-spirited to point out the national championship game didn't come close to living up to its hype. Let's face it: The Game of the Century, as some had taken to calling the matchup of 12–0 teams, was not even the Game of the Week.

Grant it this, though: The Orange Bowl beat the hell out of last year's title game(s). Remember that muddle? Three nights after USC defeated Michigan in the Rose Bowl to lock up the AP's No. 1 ranking, LSU upset Oklahoma in the Sugar, clinching the top spot in the BCS. It was college football's New Year's Irresolution.

In taking the Sooners behind the woodshed, in racking up 525 yards of offense, in limiting extraterrestrial tailback Adrian Peterson to 82 yards on 25 carries, the Trojans effectively muzzled Auburn partisans who'd been spoiling for a share of the national title. Yes, the unbeaten Tigers held off Virginia Tech in the Sugar Bowl on Monday night *(sidebar)*. But to any person who saw both games, there is only one rational conclusion: USC is in a league of its own—and the Trojans might be there for a while. With only six seniors in the starting lineup, USC has the makings of a dynasty. Heisman finalist Reggie Bush and fellow tailback LenDale White are sophomores, as is playmaking wide receiver Steve Smith, whose three touchdown catches included one he somehow cradled with one hand while a defender tugged on the other. For sheer acrobatics, that reception was matched only by the one-handed touch-

TAG TEAM Leinart (inset) hooked up with Smith on three scoring strikes, including a spectacular 33-yarder in the second quarter.

PETER READ MILLER (LEINART); BOB ROSATO



WORLD-BEATERS Campbell and the Tigers defeated four Top 10 teams, more than any other squad in the nation.

Second to **NONE**

That's what Auburn considers itself after beating Virginia Tech in the Sugar Bowl to finish 13–0 too

JASON CAMPBELL carefully placed his shiny new Most Outstanding Player trophy on the lower shelf of his locker, then pulled off his number 17 Auburn jersey for the last time. Ninety minutes had passed since the third-ranked Tigers had defeated No. 9 Virginia Tech 16–13 in the Sugar Bowl on Monday night, and it was time for the senior quarterback to get a few more things off his chest. "I know we're national champions," he said. "We're 13–0. We beat four Top 10 teams [more than any other school in the country]. Really, I don't care what anybody says. We're national champions."

In the days leading up to the Sugar Bowl, Campbell and coach Tommy Tuberville had been making this argument to anyone and everyone who had a microphone or notepad. The Tigers were the first unbeaten team from one of the six major conferences to be shut out of the BCS title game—hamstrung by a low preseason ranking (17th), which meant they had a lot of ground to make up in the polls, and by a weak nonconference schedule, which hurt them in the computer rankings—and they knew their chance for a share of the national championship was slim.

The *USA Today*/ESPN coaches poll is obligated to name the winner of the BCS title game as its champion, but voters in the AP poll had the option to declare a victorious Auburn No. 1 in its final ranking. "There are two national championship games," Tuberville insisted on the eve of the Sugar Bowl. "There's one here at the Sugar Bowl, and there's another one at the Orange Bowl." Yet it figured that for AP voters to catapult the Tigers from third to first, Auburn would have to hammer the Hokies ruthlessly, and No. 1 USC and No. 2 Oklahoma would have to stink up the Orange Bowl the next night.

Less than five minutes into the third quarter the Tigers were giving AP voters something to think about. They had just taken the second-half kickoff and marched 78 yards in eight plays to score the first touchdown of the game, a five-yard pass from Campbell to wide receiver Devin Aromashodu for a 16–0 lead. Still, Tuberville nervously paced the sideline, arms folded, knowing he needed more points—scoreboard points *and* style points—for a shot at a split title.

It didn't happen. With 6:58 to play in the game Virginia Tech scored on a 24-yard touchdown pass from Bryan Randall to receiver Josh Morgan. Then, with just more than two minutes remaining, Randall hooked up with Morgan again on an 80-yard scoring bomb. Auburn recovered the ensuing onside-kick attempt and burned out the clock, but a blowout victory—what the Tigers desperately needed—was not to be.

"I believe they're one of the best two teams in the country," said Virginia Tech coach Frank Beamer after the game, adding that he was a "company man" and would place the Orange Bowl winner No. 1 on his ballot. Early on Wednesday morning Auburn indeed wound up No. 2 behind USC in both polls. The Tigers thus became the first team from a major conference since Penn State in 1994 to finish with a perfect record but without at least a share of the national title.

It was a historic season nonetheless for Auburn, which went 13–0 for the first time. In the process Campbell took his place among the best quarterbacks to ever pass through the Plains. His record as a starter is 31–9 (including 15 straight wins to close out his career), and his 64.5% completion mark is third-best in SEC history. Against the Hokies his passing statistics were typically efficient: 11 of 16, 189 yards, one touchdown, one interception, one outstanding player trophy.

"We did everything we were asked to do," said Campbell as he mingled with Tigers fans outside the Superdome afterwards. "I'd love to play one more game, but at least we were able to make a statement tonight." To the everlasting chagrin of Auburn fans, that statement wasn't enough.

—Lars Anderson

DAVID BERGMAN

Young

SI's ALL-BOWL TEAM

OFFENSE

QB MATT LEINART USC Jr.	*He lived up to his Heisman nod with a phenomenal performance in the BCS title game: 18 of 35 for 332 yards and an Orange Bowl–record five touchdown passes.*
RB VINCE YOUNG Texas Soph.	*Sure, Young lines up under center, but it was his 192 yards and four touchdowns on the ground that propelled the Longhorns past Michigan in the Rose Bowl.*
RB LEON WASHINGTON Florida State Jr.	*Washington carried the Seminoles to a 30–18 win over West Virginia in the Gator Bowl, rushing for 195 yards, including a 69-yard touchdown.*
WR BRAYLON EDWARDS Michigan Sr.	*Though Michigan lost a heartbreaker in the Rose, Edwards showed why he's the nation's best wideout by catching 10 passes for 109 yards and three touchdowns.*
WR STEVE SMITH USC Soph.	*He had seven catches for 113 yards and three scores in the demolition of Oklahoma; teammate Dwayne Jarrett (five receptions, 115 yards, one TD) deserves co-honors.*
RT CLINT STICKDOM Cincinnati Sr.	*Stickdom fended off Marshall star Johnathan Goddard and helped the Bearcats rack up 399 yards of offense in a 32–14 Fort Worth Bowl win.*
LG ROB SMITH Tennessee Soph.	*In a 38–7 Cotton Bowl triumph over Texas A&M, Smith was the key cog in a dominating line that helped produce 474 yards of offense.*
RG AUGUST ROITSCH Navy Sr.	*Roitsch helped the Middies rush for 269 yards and produce a 26-play scoring drive that ate up 14:26 in a 34–19 victory over New Mexico in the Emerald Bowl.*
LT LOGAN MANKINS Fresno State Sr.	*The 6' 4", 320-pound Mankins paved the way for the Bulldogs to run for 222 yards in a 37–34 victory over Virginia in the MPC Computer Bowl.*
C GREG ESLINGER Minnesota Jr.	*Alabama's tough defense couldn't handle Eslinger and his linemates, behind whom the Gophers rushed for 276 yards in a 20–16 Music City Bowl win.*
TE JOE NEWTON Oregon State Soph.	*Newton was the difference in the Beavers' 38–21 Insight Bowl win over Notre Dame, catching seven passes for 85 yards and two touchdowns.*
K MATT NUZIE Connecticut Soph.	*Nuzie was Mr. Automatic, hitting all four of his field goal tries to help the Huskies to their first-ever bowl victory, a 39–10 win over Toledo in the Motor City.*
COACH PETE CARROLL USC	*The Trojans' buoyant leader kept his team loose in the week leading up to the Orange Bowl,*

down grab of tight end Dominique Byrd, a junior. Rangy wide receiver Dwayne Jarrett, a true freshman, was the third Trojan to catch a scoring pass on Tuesday night. The entire offensive line returns next year, as will most of the defense.

What about Leinart? After the 2004 Heisman winner threw five touchdown passes on Tuesday night, his stock took another jump. Will the Orange Bowl MVP join Cal's Aaron Rodgers and Utah's Alex Smith in migrating early to the NFL? Posed that question after the game, he said, "Right now I still plan on coming back." Leinart reflected on the possibilities should he return, including playing for a third straight national championship, in USC's backyard. Next year's BCS title game is in the Rose Bowl. Concluded Leinart, "It's going to take a lot for me to leave."

The stunningly lopsided score disproved the pregame notion that the two teams were evenly matched. (USC was a 1½-point favorite.) Certainly the two programs bore an uncanny resemblance to each other. Both are among the Top 10 in alltime victories; USC had 10 national titles entering the game, Oklahoma seven. Both are led by energetic, telegenic coaches who are charismatic recruiters, who are strongly rooted in defense and who awakened sleeping giants in a hurry. Bob Stoops won a national title in his second year at Oklahoma; Pete Carroll shared one in his third at USC. Both offenses are well-balanced and high-powered—they were before the Orange Bowl, at any rate—as is to be expected when the quarterback and star running back are Heisman finalists. (Peterson and Sooners quarterback Jason White, the 2003 Heisman winner, finished two-three in this year's balloting.) The look-alike defenses—"Like playing against ourselves," noted White—each featured a standout lineman named Cody, the Sooners' Dan and the Trojans' Shaun.

How would USC stop Peterson? How would it get pressure on White? Wasn't Oklahoma's offensive line among the finest in the country? USC defensive line coach Ed Orgeron spent the week before the game tossing bouquets in the direction of the men his unit would be facing. "They're awesome, man," Orgeron said. "Seven sacks all season? That's unheard of!"

But in the privacy of a meeting room in the Trojans' hotel, with the game just 30 hours away, Orgeron—the excitable Louisiana native who would begin his new job as Ole Miss coach the day after the Orange Bowl—dispensed with diplomacy. Yes, he agreed, the right side of the OU line, Outland Trophy winner Jammal Brown at tackle and Davin Joseph at guard, was excellent. His assessment of the left side was less charitable. As for center Vince Carter, whom Orgeron had publicly all but christened the next Mike Webster: "He ain't gonna block [Trojans tackle] Mike Patterson. If Patterson's gettin' blocked by that guy, he better not come to the sideline."

Orgeron said this while seated in front of a laptop, poring over video clips of Oklahoma's favorite plays and muttering observations:

"Here's Adrian on a power play. They're kickin' out. *Ooh*, he hits the hole quick!"

"See that cornerback? He's gotta rip across that block."

"See that double team? We've gotta get a hat in the crack."

In the video the defenses of Texas A&M, Baylor and Oklahoma State went after the Sooners with a variety of exotic blitzes. "That's not what we wanna do," said Orgeron. "We gotta beat 'em with a four-man rush. We gotta wear their asses out."

The Sooners adjusted nicely to a few special schemes Orgeron had cooked up for

> Cody gave credit to Tatupu, saying, "You should have heard him back there, **CALLING OUT THEIR PLAYS**. 'Left!' 'Right!' 'Screen!' It was like he was in their huddle."

RICHARD MACKSON (YOUNG); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (FIFITA)

The 24 stars—and the outstanding coach—from the 28 postseason games —*Kelley King*

Fifita

DEFENSE

DE DAVID POLLACK GEORGIA SR.	*Wisconsin quarterback John Stocco was victimized time and again by Pollack, who sacked him three times and caused a fumble in a 24–21 Outback Bowl win.*
DE MATHIAS KIWANUKA BOSTON COLLEGE JR.	*Kiwanuka was a force in the Eagles' 37–24 victory over North Carolina in the Continental Tire Bowl, with seven tackles and two sacks.*
DT STEVE FIFITA UTAH JR.	*Led by Fifita, whose five stops included two for loss, the Utes proved they can play defense too and capped an undefeated season with a 35–7 Fiesta thrashing of Pitt.*
DT DARRYL RICHARD GEORGIA TECH FR.	*The 6' 4", 300-pound Richard had two sacks and a fourth-quarter safety in the Yellow Jackets' 51–14 drubbing of Syracuse in the Champs Sports Bowl.*
LB MICHAEL BOLEY SOUTHERN MISS SR.	*Anchoring a unit that held North Texas to 212 yards in a 31–10 New Orleans Bowl win, Boley had eight tackles and returned an interception 62 yards for a touchdown.*
LB LOFA TATUPU USC JR.	*Omnipresent in the Orange Bowl, the former I-AA transfer had 12 tackles, caused a fumble and spearheaded a defense that neutralized Jason White and Adrian Peterson.*
LB DALE ROBINSON ARIZONA STATE JR	*With 11 tackles, including three for loss, Robinson helped hold Purdue to just 66 rushing yards in the Sun Devils' 27–23 victory in the Sun Bowl.*
SS NIK MOSER IOWA STATE JR.	*Moser forced a fumble and had two sacks, one of them on fourth-and-two in the fourth quarter of the Cyclones' 17–13 Independence Bowl win over Miami (Ohio).*
FS VINCENT MEEKS TEXAS TECH JR.	*His 48-yard interception return in the second quarter set up the go-ahead touchdown in the Red Raiders' 45–31 Holiday Bowl upset of Cal.*
CB DEVIN HESTER MIAMI SOPH.	*Hester ran back a blocked field goal 78 yards for a touchdown and returned an interception 28 yards to set up a field goal in a 27–10 Peach Bowl romp over Florida.*
CB VAUGHN KELLEY NAVY SR.	*After knocking New Mexico running back DonTrell Moore out early in a 34–19 Emerald Bowl win, Kelley stopped D.D. Cox on fourth-and-one in the fourth.*
P JON TORP COLORADO JR.	*Torp ran 22 yards for a first down on a fake punt in the fourth quarter of the Houston Bowl against UTEP, setting up the go-ahead TD in a 33–28 Buffaloes win.*

then pulled out the perfect game plan to exploit his young squad's speed and athleticism in a stunning title-game rout.

them, but it didn't matter. By beating their blocks and maintaining what the coaches call "gap responsibility" (plugging their assigned holes), USC's defensive front dominated the line of scrimmage, holding Peterson to just 3.3 yards per carry and forcing White into three ugly interceptions. Shaun Cody had five tackles and a momentum-killing 14-yard sack in the second quarter, but he wanted the credit to go to the guy who plays behind him, junior linebacker Lofa Tatupu, who had a game-high 12 tackles. "You should have heard him back there, calling out their plays—'Left!' 'Right!' 'Screen!' " said Cody. "It was like he was in their huddle."

That wasn't the only talking done by Tatupu, who is generously listed at 6 feet and 225 pounds. He delights in walking among mammoth offensive linemen after making a play, telling them, "Man, you're getting your butt kicked by a midget. How embarrassing is that?"

When it came to the converse matchup—USC's offensive line versus Oklahoma's D line—one man's opinion was more sought after than any other. Channeling former Sooner Brian Bosworth two weeks before the game, Oklahoma sophomore defensive end Larry Birdine was overcome by a spasm of candor, telling the team's beat writers that beyond Bush, the Trojans were an "average team" and calling Leinart "definitely overrated."

That was the last that we heard from Birdine for a spell. Forbidden by Stoops from speaking with reporters for the first six days the team was in Miami, Birdine was finally given the go-ahead for Media Day on Jan. 2. He strove mightily to be circumspect but wasn't always successful. In discussing Taitusi Lutui, USC's 6' 6", 370-pound right tackle—"He's strong, but he may not be as quick as other guys I've seen"—Birdine consistently mispronounced the mountainous Tongan's name as *Pitooie*.

"If God blesses me with three sacks," Birdine concluded, "so be it." The Almighty was not, as it turned out, so generous to Birdine, who according to several Trojans had less and less to say as the game wore on. Which is not to say USC players did not attempt to draw him out. Leinart directed several remarks to the chastened Sooner but would not repeat them for the media after the game. It's reasonable to assume they were along the lines of what tight end Alex Holmes said to Birdine in the third quarter: "I was blocking him with one arm and telling him, 'You're not going anywhere, buddy.' " After the Trojans went up 45–10, Holmes asked Birdine, "Is [Leinart] still overrated?"

The Sooners defender whom Leinart was most likely to go after was Marcus Walker, a

BOB ROSATO

A GIFT Josh Pinkard (36) and the USC punt coverage team gobbled up Mark Bradley's fumble to set up the Trojans' second score.

The 2005 TOP 10

A very early forecast for next season —*Mark Beech*

1.	**USC** 13–0 **17 returning starters**	*Even if Heisman QB Matt Leinart turns pro, Reggie Bush will power the offense, and Jeff Schweiger will anchor the D.*
2.	**MICHIGAN** 9–3 **18 returning starters**	*With wide receiver Steve Breaston, running back Michael Hart and quarterback Chad Henne, the Wolverines will be explosive.*
3.	**TEXAS** 11–1 **17 returning starters**	*The Longhorns lose only one starter on the offensive line, which should make quarterback Vince Young even more dangerous.*
4.	**TENNESSEE** 10–3 **17 returning starters**	*QB Erik Ainge will throw to the SEC's most talented trio of wideouts: C.J. Fayton, Robert Meachem and Jayson Swain.*
5.	**OHIO STATE** 8–4 **17 returning starters**	*Nine starters—including standout linebackers Bobby Carpenter, A.J. Hawk and Anthony Schlegel—return from a swarming D.*
6.	**OKLAHOMA** 12–1 **10 returning starters**	*The post–Jason White era begins with a battle between two highly touted quarterbacks, Tommy Grady and Rhett Bomar.*
7.	**VIRGINIA TECH** 10–3 **15 returning starters**	*The defense will be stingy, with three starters back from a fearsome line, and the offense will feature QB Marcus Vick.*
8.	**FLORIDA** 7–5 **16 returning starters**	*New coach Urban Meyer, who inherited one of the SEC's fastest teams, should work wonders with the Gators' wealth of talent.*
9.	**LOUISVILLE** 11–1 **14 returning starters**	*With QB Brian Brohm and bruising tailbacks Michael Bush and Eric Shelton, the Cardinals might lead the nation in scoring again.*
10.	**LSU** 9–3 **18 returning starters**	*Nick Saban bolted for the Miami Dolphins, but he left plenty of talent for new coach Les Miles from four Top 10 recruiting classes.*

HEISMAN Front-runners

Hart

With two of the nation's top quarterbacks—Cal's Aaron Rodgers and Utah's Alex Smith—entering the NFL draft early and a third, USC's Matt Leinart, possibly joining them, the Heisman Trophy could go to a running back next season for the first time since 1999. But a pair of multitalented QBs stand in the way. —M.B.

NAME, POSITION	SCHOOL	2005 CLASS	2004 STATS
ADRIAN PETERSON, RB	OKLAHOMA	Soph.	**1,925 YARDS, 15 TDS**
The workhorse has the size and skills to play in the NFL now, and he's only going to get better. Without quarterback Jason White the Sooners will lean on Peterson heavily.			
REGGIE BUSH, RB	USC	Jr.	**2,330 ALL-PURPOSE YARDS, 15 TDS**
The electrifying Bush can make plenty of big plays whether he's rushing, receiving or returning kicks—and next fall he might not be sharing the spotlight with Matt Leinart.			
CHRIS LEAK, QB	FLORIDA	Jr.	**3,197 PASSING YARDS, 29 TDS**
Leak's skills and athleticism are a perfect fit for new coach Urban Meyer's innovative offense, and his numbers should improve, but he must cut down on his interceptions (12 in 2004).			
MICHAEL HART, RB	MICHIGAN	Soph.	**1,487 YARDS, 9 TDS**
He's coming off a fantastic freshman season that included three 200-yard games but may lose votes in '05 to the Wolverines' other offensive star, sophomore quarterback Chad Henne.			
VINCE YOUNG, QB	TEXAS	Jr.	**1,079 YARDS RUSHING, 14 TDS; 1,849 YARDS PASSING, 12 TDS**
No other player in the country can take over a game the way the 6' 5" Young can with his arm or his feet. With Cedric Benson gone, Young will be counted on to carry the load.			

soft-spoken freshman cornerback who did not play a snap for the first eight games of the season. Then, on Nov. 6, in the second quarter of a game at Texas A&M in which the Oklahoma corners had missed tackles and given up several long passes, the coaches burned Walker's redshirt. Calling it a desperate situation, co–defensive coordinator Brent Venables says playing Walker on the field was "our best option. Our *only* option."

Walker didn't get torched over the final three games of the season, but that was mainly because no passer really picked on him. The period of benign neglect came to an end in the Orange Bowl. "We're going to win, you know!" Leinart's dad, Bob, declaimed outside the team hotel on the eve of the game. Would his son be going after the freshman corner? "*Oh*, yeah," said Bob. "Deep and high to number 8."

That number 8 is Jarrett, who had a busy fall, what with turning 18 and conquering homesickness and a case of the drops before emerging as Leinart's most dangerous receiver. Jarrett stands 6' 5"; Walker is 5' 11". On a third-and-eight early in the second quarter, Leinart lofted a pass toward Jarrett 18 yards up the left sideline. Walker never turned to face the ball, which Jarrett plucked off the top of Walker's helmet. On the next snap Leinart unleashed his most beautiful throw of the night, a 54-yard bomb that Jarrett caught in stride for a touchdown to put the Trojans up 21–7.

Going into the game, USC's success seemed more likely to hinge on a much-discussed hinge: LenDale White's right ankle, which he sprained in the final regular-season game and was still not healed. While his teammates whooped their way through spirited practices, the 6' 2", 235-pound sophomore—the thunder to Bush's lightning—was limited to a few straight-ahead running drills until Thursday. That evening White ran into Glena Carroll, Pete's wife, at the team hotel. After asking him how his ankle felt, Glena put her hands on it and said a short prayer.

White felt markedly better the next morning and credited Glena, who quickly became known among Trojans faithful as Our Lady of the Lobby. But would White be the bludgeoning force he was before his injury? "I'm not going into the game worrying about that," Pete Carroll said three days before the game. If White wasn't himself, Carroll insisted, the electrifying Bush would pick up the slack. The prospect of Bush's getting 30 touches rather than his

RICHARD MACKSON

JAMIE SQUIRE/GETTY IMAGES

THUMPING GOOD Smith (2) and fullback David Kirtman got chesty as the game turned into a rout of epic proportions.

customary 15 or 20 would create "a whole different set of problems" for a defense. (Yet, after entering the game late in the first quarter, White gashed the Sooners for 118 yards on 15 carries, scoring twice.)

This was vintage Carroll, the alchemist transforming bad news into opportunity. As rain pelted his team during Friday's practice, he bounced around the field, telling his players how much he envied them. "Man, I wish I could put on some pads." Later, he spoke of how fortunate the Trojans had been to practice on slippery turf, in rain and wind, because they might have to play in those conditions during the game.

After all, why should bad weather dampen Carroll's spirits, given the run of setbacks he had during the season? The NCAA rules that your star receiver, Mike Williams, can't return to the team after declaring for the NFL draft? In Carroll's world that simply opened the door for Jarrett, who emerged as a Williams-caliber talent.

That goes for the players, too. Some among Carroll's initial crop of recruits played their final collegiate game at the Orange Bowl. The first, and best, of them was Cody, a defensive end who, in his junior and senior seasons at Los Altos High in Hacienda Heights, Calif., had a total of 255 tackles and 57 sacks. He was considering a number of colleges. Then the Trojans fired coach Paul Hackett and hired Carroll, who immediately went to work on Cody. It's instructive now, following USC's 22nd straight victory and second straight national championship, to remember that Carroll's hiring provoked an angry backlash among Trojans backers. One prediction proved to be particularly absurd: that he'd have trouble signing talented players because he had no recent experience as a recruiter.

After 16 years as an assistant, coordinator and coach in the NFL, Carroll says, one of the things he likes best about college coaching is not being constrained by the draft and the salary cap. He can compete for any player he likes. Cody was struck by Carroll's vision for the program and awed by his knowledge of defensive football. "I remember thinking, Wow, I think they can [win a title]," Cody says. "I just didn't think it would happen so fast."

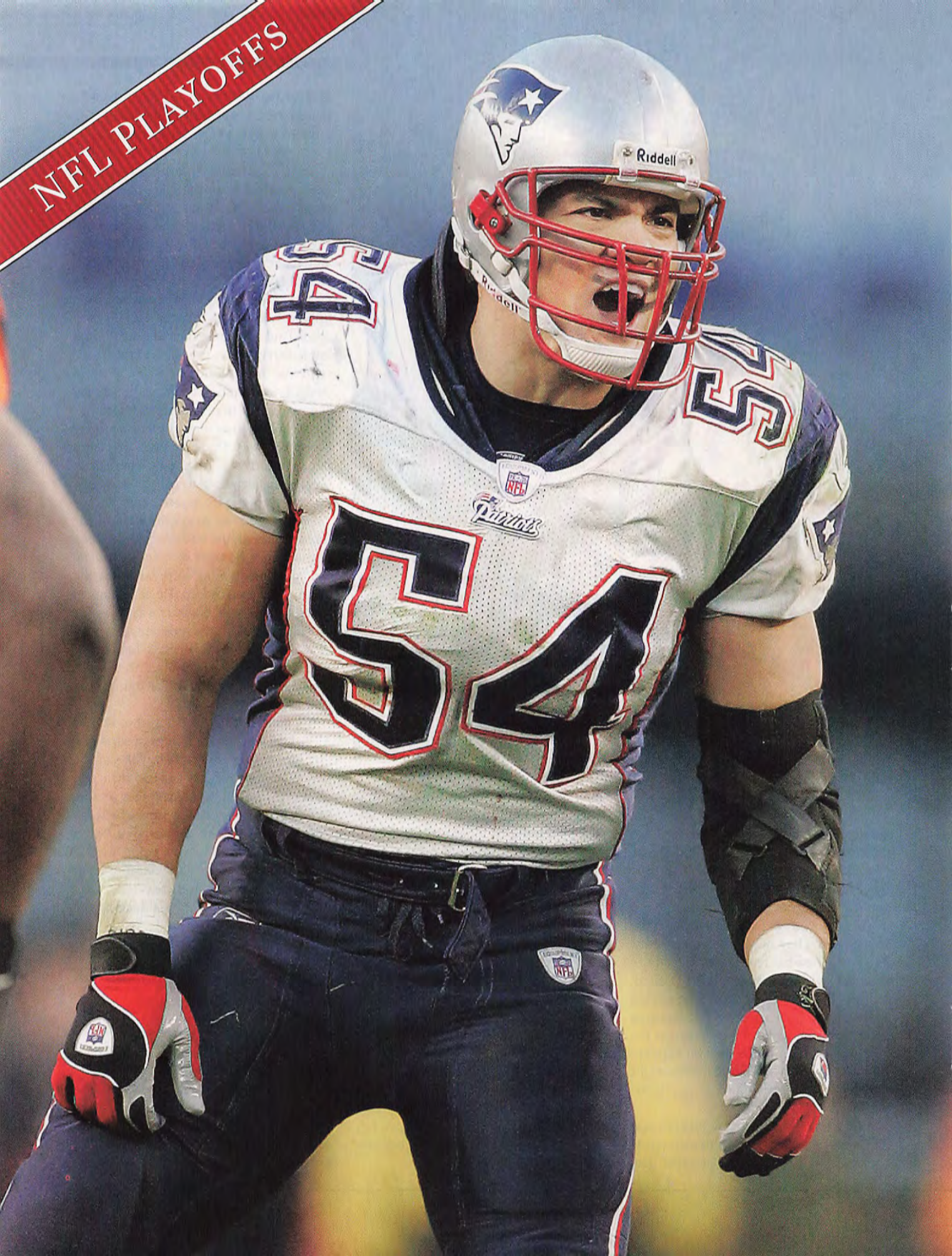
By committing to USC, the *Parade* All-America became a pioneer of sorts: the first big-name recruit to sign with Carroll, to take that leap of faith. At banquets and all-star games following his senior season, Cody's fellow blue-chip recruits would ask him what on earth he was thinking. "Guys would say, 'Why are you going to SC? They're not winning. The Coliseum's half full. The school's in the ghetto.' "

"Look at us now," Cody said before the Orange Bowl. "I feel so fortunate to have made that choice."

And after the game, there he was roaming the field, bear-hugging everyone in sight. "It's been an incredible ride," he kept saying. Cody is stepping off the elevator, but it's still going up. □

To any person who saw the bowl games, there is only one rational conclusion: USC is in a LEAGUE OF ITS OWN—and the Trojans might be there for a while.

Smith broke his left leg in the fifth game of the season? *O.K., so we get to see what some of our reserves can do!* Orgeron, who doubles as recruiting coordinator, is headed to Ole Miss? "It's what we hoped for," said Carroll. "Can't keep guys sequestered and trapped here forever."


Riddell
54
Patriots

Every Team Needs a Bruschi

Make that Tedy Bruschi, and New England has the only one. The big-play linebacker and unsung leader of the defense gives the Pats a shot at their third title in four years

BY JOSH ELLIOTT

Photograph by Damian Strohmeyer

HE IS outnumbered again, staring down a menacing double team. If it's fair to say a man's work is never done, then right here—at the backdoor to his house, after several hours of trading blows and barbs with his New England Patriots teammates—Tedy Bruschi's long day isn't over yet. When the two young boys lunge at him, chirping with delight, Bruschi sees himself in their tiny faces and hears his own father's words: *Get the ball, Tedy. Go get the ball.* Those words, which were sometimes said in derision, have motivated Bruschi since he was a child. ¶ The Bruschi boys set upon their dad again and jog him from his reverie, throwing themselves at him over and over. Later, as he is recounting this scene, Bruschi couldn't be happier. "My boys are just like me: really physical," Bruschi says of Tedy Jr., 4, and Rex, 2. "Every day it's a big tackle-athon. I love it. They never quit. They play just like their dad—and just like their dad's team."

While the Pittsburgh Steelers (15–1) are the AFC's nouveau power and the Philadelphia Eagles (13–3) are the class of the NFC, the NFL playoffs remain the domain of the defending champion New England Patriots (14–2). Winners of 29 of their last 31 games (including the postseason), the Pats have a first-round bye before beginning their quest for a third Super Bowl win in four seasons with a divisional-round game on the weekend of Jan. 15–16. New England is the league's model franchise because each player, no matter his position or cap figure, embraces coach Bill Belichick's team-first philosophy. "I know one thing," says Bruschi, 31, a New England linebacker for nine years. "I was meant to play with these 52 guys, for this coach, in this system."

Indeed, Bruschi seems the picture-perfect Patriot. Hard-nosed and a vocal leader, Bruschi (pronounced BREW-ski, to the joy of beer-swilling, pigskin-loving New Englanders) is admired for his toughness and loyalty to an organization that risked a third-round draft choice on him in 1996, when he was an undersized defensive end out of Arizona. And long before Pats defensive tackles lined up as fullbacks and wideout Troy Brown intercepted three passes as a part-time cornerback, Bruschi's versatility was celebrated. Too small, at 6' 1" and 245 pounds, to play end in the NFL, he learned three linebacker positions in two schemes under three coaches. Though unheralded in a conference that features the Baltimore Ravens' Ray Lewis and the Miami

DAVID BERGMAN

CALLING THE SHOTS After setting the defense, Bruschi can usually be found in the middle of the action.

Dolphins' Zach Thomas, he has become an All-Pro–caliber inside linebacker and routinely makes game-breaking plays.

But to understand a player so humble that he wonders aloud who would ever read an article about him, ask Bruschi what he considers to be his most important contribution each week. "Punt team," he says, not missing a beat. "The punt's the most important play in a game. So many things can happen: a turnover, a score, a big change in field position. My college coach, Dick Tomey, told me he didn't care who I was—he needed me on punt team. So I covered punts, and still do. I love covering punts."

Says New England linebacker Mike Vrabel, "Everybody needs a Tedy Bruschi, but good luck finding one. It's impossible to put value on everything the guy does. When he walks into a meeting or a huddle, he brings instant credibility. He's been productive for so long, even though he's had to switch positions. He's everything for this team."

This year Bruschi finished with 122 tackles, second best on the team, and 3½ sacks for the NFL's ninth-ranked defense. But for all his fundamental strengths, it's his knack for making the big play that sets him apart. "Their defense isn't the same without him," says New York Jets center Kevin Mawae. "He plays 100 miles an hour. He makes plays that are unbelievable."

In pass coverage Bruschi reads the quarterback as well as any other linebacker, and that anticipation enables him to jump underneath passing routes. His soft hands allow him to catch many of those throws, and his speed makes him a threat to return interceptions for big gains and points. "When we drafted him [as a linebacker], everybody knew that he could rush the passer, play the run, that he was tough as hell," says Belichick. "But his anticipation, his ball skills, after never dropping into coverage in his life. . . . He's just tremendous." Indeed, over a span covering parts of the 2002 and '03 seasons, Bruschi set an NFL record by returning four consecutive interceptions for touchdowns.

Ask the Patriots which of Bruschi's plays is the most memorable, and the vote is unanimous. On Dec. 7, 2003, with New England holding a 3–0 fourth-quarter lead over Miami and the Dolphins taking over at their four-yard line, Jay Fiedler threw a dart into the flat that Bruschi, standing just a few yards away, stabbed out of the air. His waltz into the end zone followed by a slide on his knees set off a celebra-

KING'S CORNER

The Factors in Question

Injuries, downtime, instant stardom: a Q and A on the roller-coaster ride to the Super Bowl

THE GAME meant nothing to the AFC North–champion Pittsburgh Steelers and everything to the white-hot, playoff-hopeful Buffalo Bills. When they took the ball with a 26–17 lead early in the fourth quarter on Sunday in Buffalo, the Steelers had a reserve-laden lineup on the field. Yet with fourth-string running back Willie Parker smashing into the line time and again, Pittsburgh ran 8:53 off the clock on a 14-play drive that culminated in a 33-yard field goal. Ball game. In the 25 years that the NFL has played a 16-game schedule, the Steelers became the fourth team to finish 15–1. They did it by imposing their iron will on opponents.

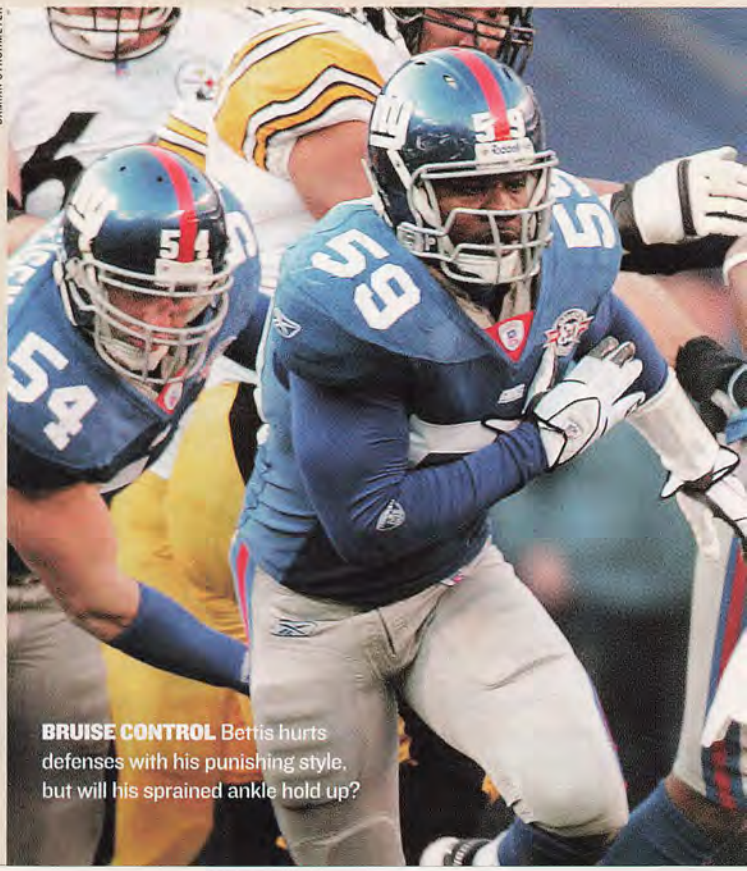
"It's who we are," said running back Jerome Bettis, who sat out the 29–24 win with a sprained ankle. "Is this the same team that beat the Eagles and the Patriots in the middle of the season, the same team that beat the Ravens last week? Yes, even with different players. The fact that we have an identity and consistency gives us an edge. If we don't win [the Super Bowl], I think it'll be a huge underachievement."

With one small *if*, the Steelers are the team to beat when the playoffs begin this weekend. Here are five intriguing questions about the postseason.

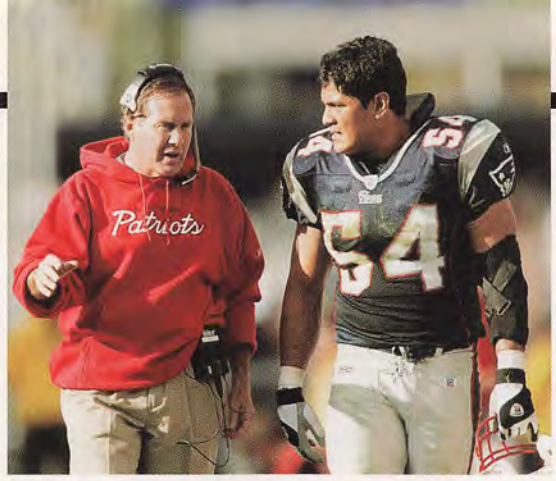
1 Are the Steelers healthy enough on offense to go all the way? Probably, but this is the one *if*. Bettis, quarterback Ben Roethlisberger (ribs) and wideouts Plaxico Burress (hamstring) and Hines Ward (hip flexor) sat out the Buffalo game as a precaution and will get another week to heal thanks to the first-round bye Pittsburgh earned for being one of the top two seeds in its conference. Roethlisberger seems fine; he threw with minimal pain last week. The key rehabs before the Steelers face the Chargers, Jets or Broncos next week: Burress and Bettis. Pittsburgh will need Burress to stretch the defense, but he may not be at top speed after missing six of the last seven games. More than Duce Staley, who has been slowed by a bad hamstring, Bettis has given the Steelers' ground game its punishing identity. "I'll be O.K.," said Bettis, who in his six starts rushed for 738 yards, "but I need this week."

2 Which team playing on wild-card weekend is the most dangerous? It's tempting to say the Colts, but here's a vote for the Chargers, who open at home on Saturday against the Jets. San Diego ranked third in the league against the run (81.7 yards per game) and has a disruptive pass rush, which drove Peyton Manning nuts for three quarters

DAMIAN STROHMEYER



BRUISE CONTROL Bettis hurts defenses with his punishing style, but will his sprained ankle hold up?



JOHN BIEVER

ON THE SAME PAGE Bruschi became a force after the defensive-minded Belichick was named coach in 2000.

tion during which Patriots fans tossed snow and turned Gillette Stadium into a winter wonderland as they celebrated the franchise's clinching of the AFC East. "Any other linebacker in the league knocks that ball down," says New England special teams ace Larry Izzo. "But Tedy caught the damn thing and then scored. Impossible."

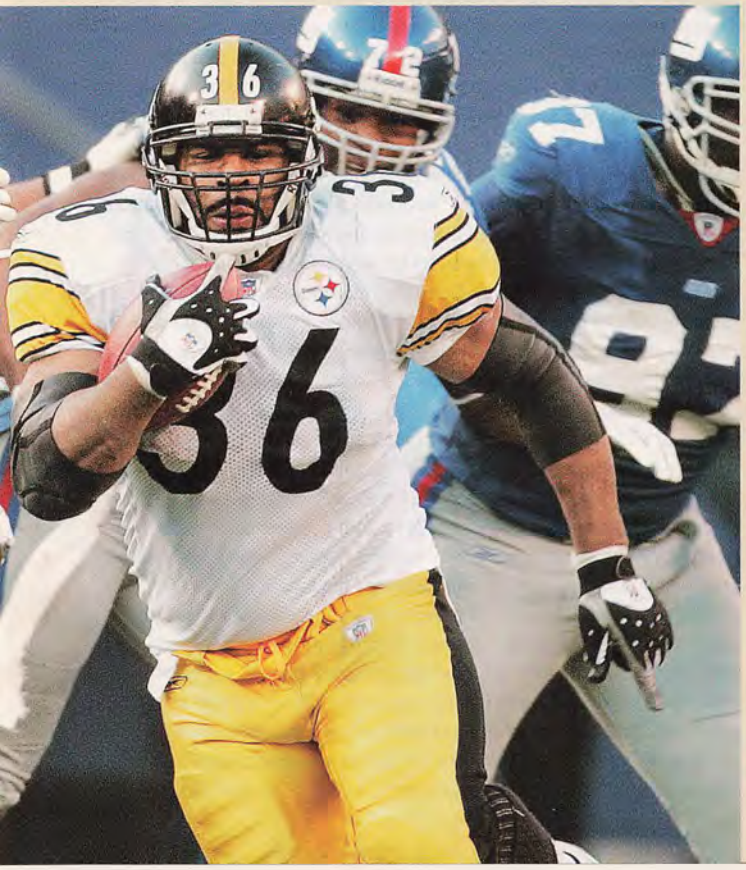
"When he made that play," adds linebacker Roman Phifer, "we all got a sense that maybe we were something special." They were, indeed: The 12–0 victory was the ninth straight in a winning streak that stretched to an NFL-record 21 games before a 34–20 loss in Pittsburgh on Oct. 31.

"Everyone can make a big play," says Bruschi. "It's all about that moment, that split second, when you decide what you are going to do: Are you going to just knock the pass down, or will you catch it? Are you going to sack the quarterback, or will you force the fumble? You need time [in the NFL] to build to a level where you know what you can do with your talent. It took me years just to get comfortable."

RAISED IN San Francisco and Roseville, Calif., by his mother, Juanita, after his parents divorced when he was three (Juanita remarried two years later), Bruschi was initially steered toward music and the arts; he still plays alto sax at recitals with students from the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Mass. His relationship with his father, Tony, was strained. "I saw him on weekends," Tedy says, "so we could only do so much." Tedy started playing football as a freshman at Roseville High, and unsure where to go when the team split into position groups at the first practice, he was

in a Dec. 26 game before the Colts rallied to win in overtime. And what about the Chargers having to play in cold weather against the Steelers or the Patriots in the next round? Last month San Diego romped over Cleveland 21–0 in the snow.

3 Did Philadelphia rest its stars too much down the stretch?
When the Eagles, the top seed in the NFC, play on Jan. 15 or 16, they will be coming off a stretch of having not played well for more than 40 days, since a 47–17 win over the Packers on Dec. 5 that clinched a playoff berth. Philly squeezed out wins over the Redskins and the Cowboys, then got throttled by the Rams and the Bengals while sitting many starters. After wide receiver Terrell Owens broke his leg against Dallas, the Eagles made sure Donovan McNabb stayed healthy by playing him only one series in the last two games. But will the Pro Bowl quarterback be sharp for the divisional-round game? "We've practiced together, we played a lot of games together, we went through two-a-days together," running back Brian Westbrook, who didn't even dress for the last two games, said on Sunday after the 38–10 loss to Cincinnati. "We won't have any problem turning it on when it's time to go."



4 Who will be the next Tom Brady, a good player made great by Super Bowl success?
Here are three candidates: Westbrook, who by leading the Eagles to a title could emerge as a Marshall Faulk–caliber all-purpose back; Corey Dillon, whose nine 100-yard rushing games this year gave the Patriots a dimension they sorely lacked; and my pick, Roethlisberger. He's a rookie, he's cool, he's small town (Findlay, Ohio) and he's already got at least two sandwiches named after him. Most important at this time of year, he's a clutch player. If the Steelers need a 65-yard drive with two minutes left, Roethlisberger doesn't flinch. He's also 13–0 as a starter.

5 Will the NFC champion, whoever it is, even stand a chance in Super Bowl XXXIX?
The Super Bowl might be the ultimate trap game for the AFC champion. It happened to the Bills in January 1991; they were huge favorites against the Giants, who had kicked five field goals to beat the 49ers for the NFC crown. New York won the big game 20–19. As long as Westbrook and McNabb stay healthy, the Eagles will be a threat to any opponent, TO or no TO. In the NFC, only the Falcons (an inconsistent offensive team that will have to be at its best to beat Philadelphia on the road) should challenge the Eagles. And although the AFC was clearly the superior conference this year—it was a record 44–20 in interconference play—Philadelphia and Atlanta were a combined 5–3 against AFC foes.

My Super Bowl pick: Steelers 31, Eagles 20. A team with a great running game and a defense that has answered every challenge doesn't get caught in a trap.

—Peter King

FAN CLUB Tedy gets plenty of support on the home front from Heidi, Tedy Jr. (left) and Rex.

DAVID SILVERMAN/NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

told by a coach to join the defensive linemen. He was devastated after Tony told his son that he was too small to play on the line. "We'd have huge fights on the phone," Tedy recalls. "It wasn't pretty." Nevertheless, as a senior Tedy earned all–Northern California honors as a defensive tackle.

When Bruschi arrived at Arizona in 1991, the questions kept coming from the media about his lack of size. But by his redshirt sophomore year he'd emerged as one of the leaders of Arizona's Desert Swarm defense, and he finished his college career with 52 sacks, tying Alabama's Derrick Thomas (later of the Kansas City Chiefs) for the NCAA record. All the while Tedy's father kept telling him to move to linebacker. "He could say what he wanted, but I was doing it," Bruschi says. "I could put my numbers up against anyone in the history of college football. That made me feel good about myself."

So did meeting Heidi Bomberger, a volleyball and softball player at Arizona, in the fall of '93. She was someone Tedy could turn to after angry conversations with his dad. "Having his father doubt him hurt Tedy much more than I think he'll ever admit," says Heidi, who married Tedy in the summer after his rookie season. "Those conversations would always affect him. But he just used the negativity as motivation."

Though Bruschi lacked a natural position, Patriots linebackers coach Al Groh (now the coach at Virginia) wanted him. When Bruschi got the phone call at his apartment on draft day, he was stunned.

DR. Z'S ALL-PRO TEAM

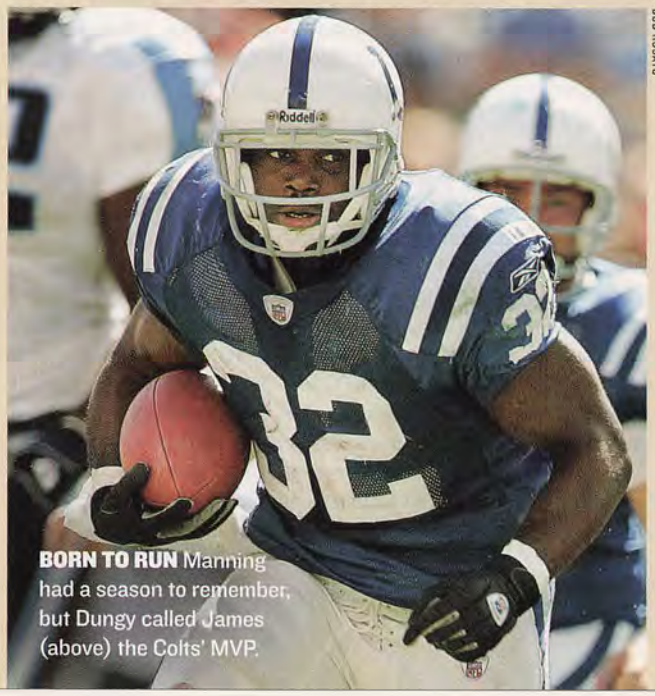
The Best of the Best

Players from postseason squads dominate the selections by SI's resident expert

THE CLASS of the NFC, the Eagles, dominate my 2004 All-Pro team, with four players selected. The Chargers, Colts, Jets and Steelers, all playoff-bound AFC teams, have three each. And the Patriots' Bill Belichick, who again overcame major injuries to keep his team on top, is my Coach of the Year.

Wideout Terrell Owens changed the Eagles in four ways: He gave them a serious downfield threat, ate up double teams, took the heat off the other receivers and, simply with his presence, rehabilitated the bruised psyche of quarterback Donovan McNabb. Muhsin Muhammad was the big-play guy in Carolina's attack. At tight end, production in the red zone gave San Diego's Antonio Gates the edge over the Chiefs' Tony Gonzalez.

In any other year Vikings quarterback Daunte Culpepper would be an easy choice, but this was Peyton Manning's landmark season, when everything came together for him as he ran the Indianapolis offense. And the man whom Colts coach Tony Dungy named as his choice for team MVP is my pick at running back, Edgerrin James. The Jets' Jerald Sowell caught more passes (45) than any other fullback in the NFL.



BORN TO RUN Manning had a season to remember, but Dungy called James (above) the Colts' MVP.

BOB ROSATO

The Seahawks' Walter Jones is the NFL's premier pass-blocking tackle, while Pittsburgh's Marvel Smith provides great drive-blocking power. Guard Pete Kendall's arrival brought the Jets line together and gave New York's offense some punch. Kansas City's Will Shields gets the other guard spot for long and meritorious service. It's also been a landmark year for Jets center Kevin Mawae, who has been hustling like a madman to get in front of sweeps and screens.

No player did as much for a defense as end Dwight Freeney, the demon pass rusher, did for Indianapolis. The Steelers' Aaron Smith was that rare 3–4 end who not only absorbed blocks but also stormed into the backfield. At tackle I thought the Jaguars' John Henderson was better than his Pro Bowl teammate, Marcus Stroud, and the Redskins' Cornelius Griffin was the front man for one of the NFL's best defenses. Pittsburgh's James Farrior has always been a steady inside 'backer, and this season he made a frenzy of big plays. For my outside 'backers I took pass-defense specialists over sackers: the Titans' Keith Bulluck and the Chargers' Donnie Edwards.

The era of the shutdown cornerback is over. The tightened pass-defense rules have seen to that. My twosome of Sheldon Brown—the only Philly DB who's not going to the Pro Bowl, but the best in that secondary, according to coordinator Jim Johnson—and the Bills' Nate Clements have stood out. The Ravens' Ed Reed and the Eagles' Brian Dawkins are playmakers par excellence at the safeties.

One kick gives Philadelphia's David Akers the nod over the Patriots' Adam Vinatieri: a 50-yarder that beat the Browns in overtime. San Diego's Mike Scifres had the lowest percentage of nontouchback punts returned this season. Detroit's Eddie Drummond, unfortunately injured in the 11th game, still finished as the league leader in combined return yards, and the Saints' Mel Mitchell is living proof that it's possible to pick a special-teamer other than the Pats' Larry Izzo.

—Paul Zimmerman

"I hear, 'Tedy, this is Bill Parcells. We're going to try you at linebacker. Here's Al Groh,' " Bruschi says. "And that was that. I was terrified."

He walked out of the living room, Heidi recalls, and announced, "New England just took me. I'm going to do everything I can to stay there for the rest of my career."

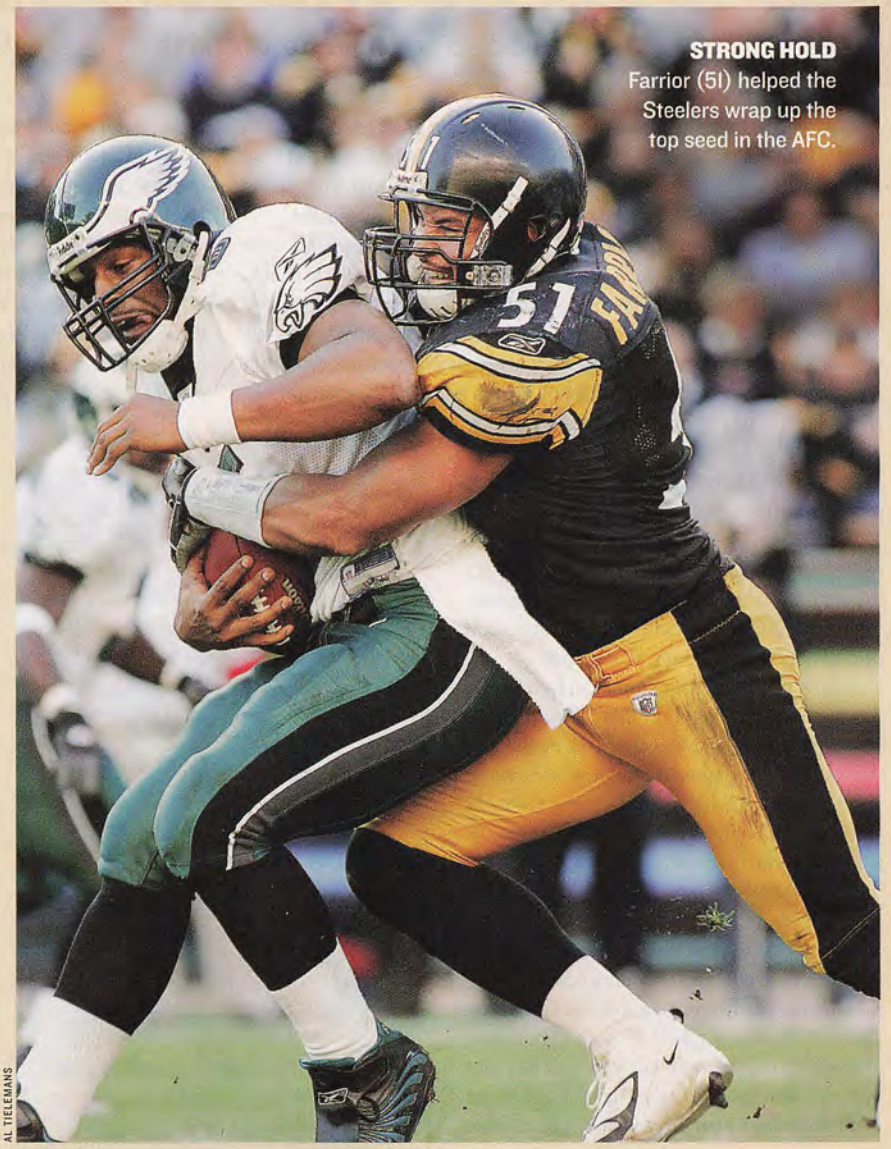
During his rookie season Bruschi was tried at all three linebacker positions in Parcells's 4–3, and of course, he made himself useful on special teams. "It took me almost two years not to laugh when I called myself a linebacker," says Bruschi, who played primarily in passing situations during his first year. "But I was scared. Learning the position was the hardest thing I'd ever done. I'd never played a down without my hand [in a three-point stance]. I was dropping into pass coverage on handoffs. I didn't know what I was seeing. I didn't know how to study film—and I was making [some of the] defensive calls. I was just hanging on."

When Pete Carroll replaced Parcells after Bruschi's rookie season—which ended with a Super Bowl loss to the Green Bay Packers—Bruschi started to relax and finally felt comfortable while playing inside; in 1999 he was second on the team with 138 tackles. Belichick, who had served as New England's secondary coach in '96, returned as coach in 2000, and Bruschi became a force. "Bill wanted us to be physical, always physical," Bruschi says. "For me, that meant attacking the roaming guards. I'd never done that, but I just went for it. Most places, they ask you to run around guys to the ball. Here, we go *through* guys."

FOR ALL HIS ferocity on the field, what fans don't see—and what teammates appreciate—is his sense of humor and his kindness. He's also a doting husband and father, in part because he finally came to feel like a loving, and beloved, son. In April 2000, after years of disagreements, Tony persuaded Tedy and Heidi to visit him in his hometown of Pontestrambo, Italy, to which he had returned in the late '90s. "It was a self-exploratory experience Tedy needed," says Heidi. "And they both got closure. They fixed the relationship."

While in Italy, Heidi learned she was pregnant with Tedy Jr. The following

OFFENSE		
WR	TERRELL OWENS	*Eagles*
T	WALTER JONES	*Seahawks*
G	WILL SHIELDS	*Chiefs*
C	KEVIN MAWAE	*Jets*
G	PETE KENDALL	*Jets*
T	MARVEL SMITH	*Steelers*
TE	ANTONIO GATES	*Chargers*
WR	MUHSIN MUHAMMAD	*Panthers*
QB	PEYTON MANNING	*Colts*
RB	EDGERRIN JAMES	*Colts*
FB	JERALD SOWELL	*Jets*
DEFENSE		
E	AARON SMITH	*Steelers*
T	CORNELIUS GRIFFIN	*Redskins*
T	JOHN HENDERSON	*Jaguars*
E	DWIGHT FREENEY	*Colts*
OLB	KEITH BULLUCK	*Titans*
MLB	JAMES FARRIOR	*Steelers*
OLB	DONNIE EDWARDS	*Chargers*
CB	SHELDON BROWN	*Eagles*
CB	NATE CLEMENTS	*Bills*
SS	ED REED	*Ravens*
FS	BRIAN DAWKINS	*Eagles*
SPECIAL TEAMS		
K	DAVID AKERS	*Eagles*
P	MIKE SCIFRES	*Chargers*
RET	EDDIE DRUMMOND	*Lions*
Special Teams	MEL MITCHELL	*Saints*
AWARDS		
Player of the Year	MANNING	*Colts*
Coach of the Year	BILL BELICHICK	*Patriots*
Rookie of the Year	BEN ROETHLISBERGER, QB	*Steelers*



STRONG HOLD
Farrior (51) helped the Steelers wrap up the top seed in the AFC.

AL TIELEMANS

December, Tony returned to the U.S. to see his newborn grandson, but it was the last time he would be together with Tedy and his family. Shortly thereafter Tony died from prostate cancer. "I'm just happy he got to see my son," says Tedy, his voice catching.

"I have no doubt that Tedy's the dad to his kids that he wished he'd always had," Heidi says. "He's available, he's interested in them. He realizes that his kids want their daddy's attention." At team functions Bruschi shoots video of all the players' children and delivers DVDs of the events to amazed teammates the next day. He no longer watches game tape at home; instead he stays late at the club's practice facility. "I'm all theirs when I'm home," he says of his time with the boys. "If I'm thinking of work at home, I'm cheating my family."

He credits Heidi with his transformation from Tucson party boy to North Attleboro family man. "She makes me want to be better," he says. "I can't imagine a better partner." To the chagrin of teammates, he sets the doting-hubby bar awfully high. He sends flowers with such frequency that his calls to the Foxboro Flower Garden are met with, "What's Heidi getting this week?" Usually, it's her favorite, stargazer lilies, even though their aroma is so pungent that it gives him headaches. "Or on the morning after a game," says Heidi, who on Monday was expected to deliver the couple's third child, "after moaning and tossing and turning all night from the pain from Sunday's game, he'll sneak out of bed at 6:30 and let me sleep in because it's the one morning he can [assist with the kids]. It's small, but it's so loving. He wants to help."

Now, when Bruschi thinks of his father, he recalls bits and pieces of Tony's wisdom and appreciates "how much raising my dad actually did," he says. "I hear him all the time now. It's funny, but he was the first one who told me I'd play middle linebacker in the pros. Guess I should've listened to him."

Bruschi is sitting in Luciano's, an Italian restaurant a few miles south of Gillette Stadium. He takes a last sip of cranberry juice and excuses himself, exchanges greetings with a few admiring patrons and slips out a side door. There are little Bruschis waiting for him at home, small and ferocious, and always coming back for more. □

DR. Z'S FORECAST

A Not-So-Wild Wild-Card Weekend

It looks like one mild upset and three easy calls in the first round

FOR THE last three years, and 16 of the last 17, at least one road team has triumphed on wild-card weekend. Which one will it be this year? I won't keep you in suspense. It'll come in the first game out of the box, when **St. Louis upsets the homestanding Seahawks**.

It has been duly recorded that in October, when the Rams came from 17 down to beat 3–0 Seattle in overtime, they left the Seahawks in shock. The winning TD came on a play in which defensive coordinator Ray Rhodes blitzed the house, rushing eight men at Marc Bulger. Two more losses followed. Rhodes's unit was so deeply scarred that when the teams met again in November, the Seattle defense looked like the firm of Layback & Watchit. The Rams ran up 214 yards of total offense in the first quarter of a game that was never really close. Even after St. Louis lost two offensive linemen, the Seattle front got no pressure.

The only thing that can stop St. Louis is its weird arrogance on offense. The Rams inject bizarre twists when least expected, resulting in an inordinate number of turnovers—and turnovers might keep the score close.

I don't like the Jets' chances in San Diego, because I am certain that Chad Pennington's shoulder is not right. You could tell by the way he was throwing against St. Louis on Sunday, cranking up and delivering floaters. Of his 21 completions, only seven were longer than 10 yards, and the deepest was 17. I guess the Jets feel that at this stage of the season a wounded Pennington is better than a healthy Quincy Carter. It's the El Cid syndrome. Prop him up, tape his eyes open and tie him on his horse.

After his tough outing against the Patriots on Dec. 26, Pennington said his sore right shoulder was O.K.; the problem was that his feet weren't planted correctly. Right. Against the Rams they were planted so well that ferns were growing out of them, and his ball still had nothing on it. I'll bet that within a week of the end of their season, the Jets announce that he's having shoulder surgery. Barring a miracle or a 200-yard explosion from Curtis Martin, **the Chargers will win it**.

Last year Peyton Manning threw for 377 yards and five TDs against Denver in a wild-card playoff, which, they say, is why the Broncos traded for Champ Bailey. The Champ has had an odd season. Supposedly the league's premier shutdown corner, he has had strange lapses in concentration. The Bengals' Chad Johnson caught a couple of 50-yarders on him. The Raiders' Jerry Porter ate him alive. Bailey will probably cover Marvin Harrison all over the field, which might work out for Denver, if Bailey's head is in it.

JESSE BEALS/ICON SMI

HAT TRICK Brandon Manumaleuna and the Rams will grab their third win of the season against Seattle.

The toughest matchup for the Broncos will be Roc Alexander, a rookie free agent who inherited the nickelback job after two others were lost for the season, on Indy's third wideout, Brandon Stokley, who has destroyed nickel coverage all year. I guess that's where the Broncos will provide double-team help, which will leave the corners manned up against Harrison and Reggie Wayne. **The Colts win it**, maybe big.

Finally there's Minnesota, dragging its sorry behind into Green Bay to take its licking and go home. Did you happen to catch Randy Moss heading for the locker room as the Vikings were lining up for an onside kick against Washington on Sunday? The only thing that can keep Minnesota in the game is the Packers' secondary. Green Bay has given up 33 TD passes this season, an alltime Packers record. And when you say alltime with this franchise, you're going back 84 years. But I get the feeling that the Vikings are ready to bid the season bye-bye and head for warmer climes. **The Packers advance**. —P.Z.

WHEN ANY OLD SAUSAGE WON'T DO, THIS WILL.

Jimmy Dean

REAL, HOT BREAKFAST.

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The Good Life?

He may be a rich NBA superstar with his own jet, but Tracy McGrady has his worries—like how to rescue the Rockets and how to repair his reputation

BY KARL TARO GREENFELD

Photograph by Walter Iooss Jr.

SOMETIMES TRACY MCGRADY wonders what it's like to have a real job. He admits he has no idea. Framed by tan curtains, he is lying on a burgundy-and-cream sofa in velour sweats, his neatly shorn head propped at a 45-degree angle on a brown cushion, his torso connected by spindly legs to his distant, stockinged feet. The effect of this scene, the languorous posture of a dauphin in repose, suggests magnificent confidence. "I would like to know how it feels to punch a clock, to balance a check," he says as he watches his own Adidas commercial on television, in which miniature soldiers, tanks and helicopters are overpowered by a dunking T-Mac. He shakes his head, slowly, gnawing for a moment on the nail of his right index finger. McGrady never had a paper route or bagged a grocery, and now, a centimillionaire at 25, he realizes he may have missed something. "I don't know what life is like, I don't know how regular people live," he says. "I just can never understand it. My first job was the NBA."

And the corollary, he insists, is that none of us can understand what it is like to be him.

Think of all the differences between Houston Rockets shooting guard Tracy McGrady and the rest of us. We have never been on TV; he is on all the time. We started out with a part-time job; he earned $245,000 on his first payday. We know how many bathrooms there are in our house; he does not. "Bathrooms?" he says. "Seven, eight, 10?" McGrady wonders how to bridge the gap between us and him, how to stay connected with the fans who watch games and buy sneakers, providing him with a revenue stream that makes the gulf more likely to widen.

"I'm just one guy," he says. "I can't bring the whole league closer to the fans. But I worry about that. Look, people have no idea what it feels like to be me, to be the guy who is blamed for the problems when the team is losing. I'm the guy making the

RELOCATION His new 25,000-square-foot house is a home now that McGrady has brought his fiancée and their daughter to Houston.

most money, so I'm the guy everyone blames. What if people came to your job, if your company wasn't doing well, and said, 'You, you are the problem'? You would say, *Me?* It's a whole company, a whole team."

The tattoo on his right shoulder reads, AND EVERY TONGUE THAT SHALL RISE UP AGAINST THEE IN JUDGEMENT SHALL BE CONDEMNED—ISAIAH 54:17.

HE IS driving down Route 59 from the Toyota Center to his new house in the suburb of Sugar Land. McGrady is behind the wheel of his BMW 7 series sedan, the V12 purring and the interior smelling like peaches. There has always been a droop to his gaze, a sleepy sag below the eyes that gave him, even as a 18-year-old rookie, an air of weariness. Now, after eight seasons and three teams, he has grown into that heavy-lidded look, his experience having finally caught up with his facial expression.

He's talking on his cellphone, arranging for his fiancée, ClaRenda Harris, and their one-year-old daughter, Layla, to fly in from North Carolina. The family has yet to spend a night in the 25,000-square-foot mansion he bought from former Houston Astros pitcher Shane Reynolds. He presses OFF, and another call comes in. "It's here? All right! What exit?"

He puts down his phone and says, "This is going to blow your mind." But he's talking to himself.

Five minutes later he emerges from the BMW and stretches in the bright sun. His usually unhurried walk is suddenly brisk. He enters the commuter airport terminal, passes a few surprised businessmen, and there, glistening on the tarmac, is a white Falcon 2000 with T1 MAC painted on the side. This is the first time he has seen his new jet. He stands for a moment on the runway, taking it in, shaking his head. He bounds up the stairs. The interior is champagne and cream; the walnut trim is buffed to an almost metallic sheen. He is greeted by his business manager, Gustavson Bass, who points McGrady to the VIP seat—the first seat on the right side of the cabin—and shows him the armrest controls for the sound system, DVD player and air conditioner.

The 6' 8" McGrady sits down, sinking into the soft leather. He smiles and looks out the porthole.

"We're actually saving money by having this plane," Bass explains. "With the depreciation schedule and being able to lease it out, this will pay for itself."

McGrady isn't listening. He is already out of his seat and down the gangway. At the bottom of the stairs he turns around and takes in the plane once more. Then he is gone.

"I'm the first one," he says, back in the car. "No NBA player ever had his own jet."

Won't this set off a frenzied plane-buying competition among elite players?

"All right," he says with a laugh. "Let them bring it."

That gulf between player and fan has never seemed so unbridgeable.

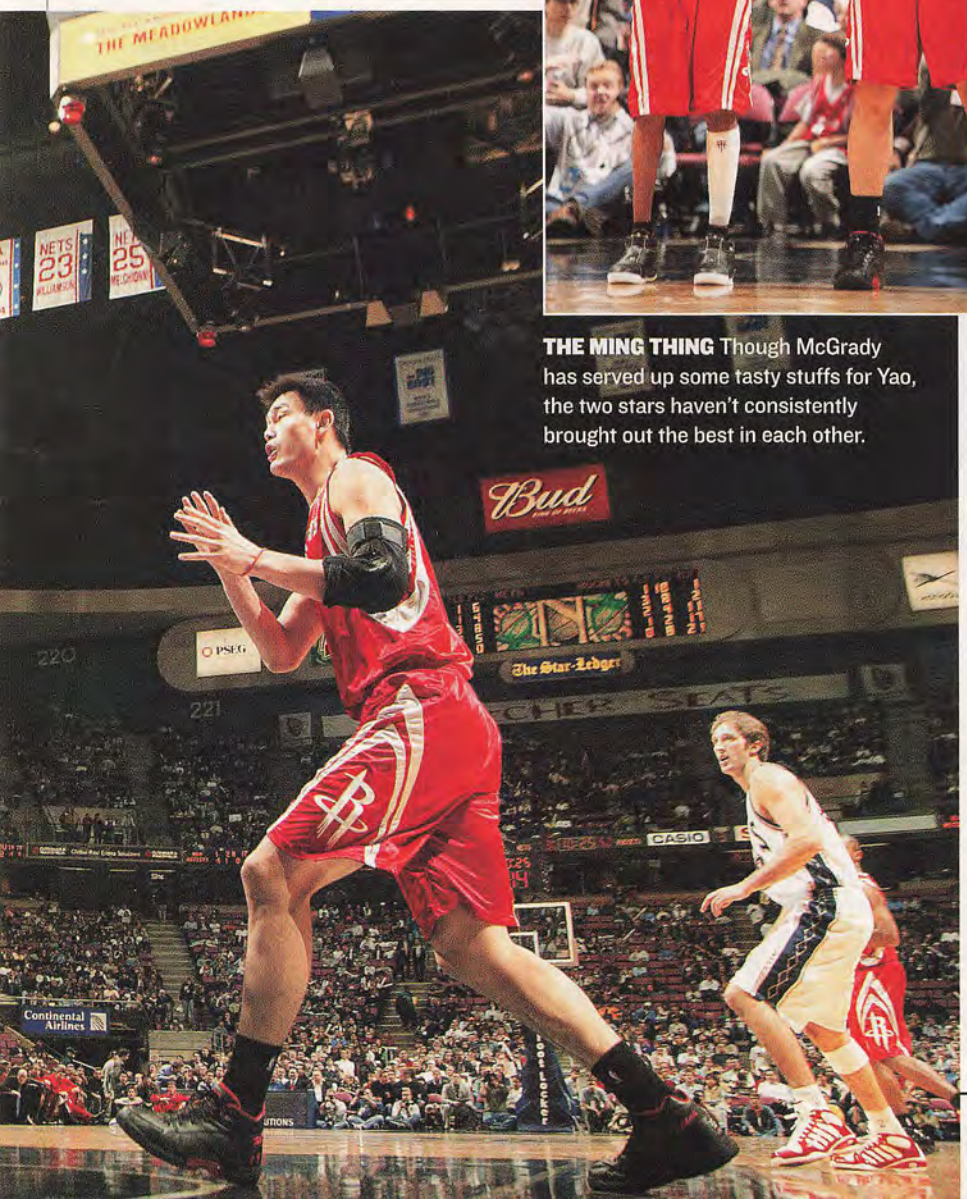
"OH, IT'S a business, it's a business," McGrady says of the NBA. As he's driving, he thinks back on his career, on his rookie season alone in that Toronto apartment during a frigid Canadian winter, barely playing for a Raptors team that won 16 games. A year earlier he had been the star at Mount Zion Christian Academy in Durham, N.C., where he would walk by the Lexus

"Look, people have no idea what it's like to be me, to be the guy who is blamed for the problems when the team is losing," McGrady says. "What if people came to your job, if your company wasn't doing well, and said, 'YOU, YOU ARE THE PROBLEM'?"

dealership in Raleigh and wave to the pretty salesgirl, swearing that he was someday going to own that silver Lexus Landcruiser and maybe even marry that girl. (He bought that car. He is engaged to that girl.) From the security of high school, with games in which he took a seat in the fourth quarter because he had given his team such a huge lead, he went suddenly to riding the pine in Toronto behind Reggie Slater.

And that was when he first heard it: *Tracy is lazy, Tracy is unfocused.* Initially, coach Butch Carter interpreted his laid-back style as a lack of commitment. But his teammates didn't mistake impassiveness for indifference. "I saw this years ago," says Vince Carter. "We all knew: Look at this guy. He can play." In McGrady's third season he averaged 15.4 points and 6.3 rebounds, enticing the Orlando Magic into working a sign-and-trade deal and assuming his seven-year, $93 million contract. Living just 40 minutes from his hometown of Auburndale, the setup was perfect; surely he and Grant Hill would contend for an NBA title. "That was as happy as he ever was, right then," says boyhood friend Obie McDowell. "He was on his way to a happy ending."

Hill's perennially injured left ankle drastically changed the script. Without him McGrady suffered through three straight opening-round playoff exits, but he flourished as a one-man attack. His fadeaway jumper became one of the most effective weapons in the league, earning him scoring titles in 2003 and '04. Those numbers, however, couldn't buoy the team, which started last season 1–19. Now the same laid-back attitude that had put off the coaching staff in Toronto was fueling the perception in Orlando of McGrady as a spoiled superstar. He became the lightning rod for the fans' frustration. "With all the talent, all the notoriety that comes with being the Man, there comes criticism," says Hill. "What great player hasn't been criticized?"



THE MING THING Though McGrady has served up some tasty stuffs for Yao, the two stars haven't consistently brought out the best in each other.

MANNY MILLAN (2)

McGrady further alienated fans by sulking, becoming a turnstile on defense and standing by the scorer's table with his arms folded while his teammates huddled during timeouts. "Last year was a difficult season for him personally," says Magic coach Johnny Davis. "He seemed to withdraw. You always like for things to end on a positive note, but it just didn't happen that way here."

After dealing McGrady, along with Juwan Howard, Reece Gaines and Tyronn Lue, to the Rockets for Steve Francis, Cuttino Mobley and Kelvin Cato—the first time a reigning scoring champ had been traded since Bob McAdoo in 1976—Orlando G.M. John Weisbrod publicly questioned McGrady's work ethic, saying that a "superstar is defined by wins, by making the players around him better and by making the team better."

"Wait," McGrady says, hearing the echo of those criticisms. "Listen. You can sit there and say I'm making millions of dollars and I should play hard every night and how can I not? It's not that easy. In those situations you forget about how much you're making. It becomes so hard to get up for every game. Every finger is pointing at me. And I'm not going to sit here and say I played my hardest every night. I'm not going to say I played good defense every night. But this is a team game. How can you play if you don't trust your teammates?"

He pauses as if he is hearing his own words. "Some nights I did slack off—and I knew that was a terrible thing to do—and

I still was slacking off. That feels so bad. And I'm the leader, these guys are following my lead, so the whole team suffers even worse. That was wrong. Now I would do it differently. I learned. I have to bust my butt no matter what. Last year was the worst experience of my life. And I learned. And believe me, I'm grateful for this opportunity here."

TO MAKE this opportunity in Houston work, McGrady has modified his gunner's philosophy (at week's end he was taking 3.3 fewer shots per game than last season) and is leading the Rockets in assists. If anyone tracked passes that bounce off a teammate's hands and go out of bounds, he would lead the league in that stat. The equation that lured T-Mac to Houston—Big Man + Perimeter Threat = Title—applies only if McGrady and 7' 6" Yao Ming enhance each other's games. For too much of this season, however, it has looked like subtraction by addition. Through last Saturday, T-Mac was scoring 24.0 points per game versus 28.1 last year, while Yao's production was up only slightly, to 18.8 from 17.5. Houston's offense hinges on McGrady, whether he's driving and dishing, or staying on the perimeter to pass to Yao or to look for his own shot. With McGrady trying to incorporate his teammates into the offense, points have been scarce. At week's end the Rockets were 15–15, and they ranked 26th in the league in scoring.

There are too many nights when Yao is a nonfactor, when he has trouble executing the pick-and-roll, takes an eternity to repost and has trouble fighting through a screen without committing a foul. When asked whether Yao will ever be a dominant player, McGrady smiles and says, "That's what everybody asks me. Everyone wants Yao to be superaggressive, but he's not. That's not his game. Yao, he's like a Rik Smits–type, you know? He's so big, and he's got a nice touch. I think he can become that type of player."

But McGrady didn't force a trade out of Orlando to play with a Rik Smits–type, did he?

McGrady shakes his head. "No, he'll be better than that, once he learns to let the dog out every night."

Yao says that the addition of McGrady has taken pressure off him. "When he's out [on the perimeter], the defense has to double-team him. And when he drives, he is so good at finding the open man. Steve Francis and Tracy McGrady are both great teammates, but Tracy is a very helpful teammate."

"Tracy is such a more unselfish player than people think," says coach Jeff Van Gundy. "He finds a way to make his teammates better. Once Yao gets used to the spots where [McGrady] will get him the ball, we'll execute better."

"If this is Yao's team, if that's the way we can win, I'm rolling with that," says McGrady. "There's nothing about me that's selfish. Man, I average more assists than my point guard."

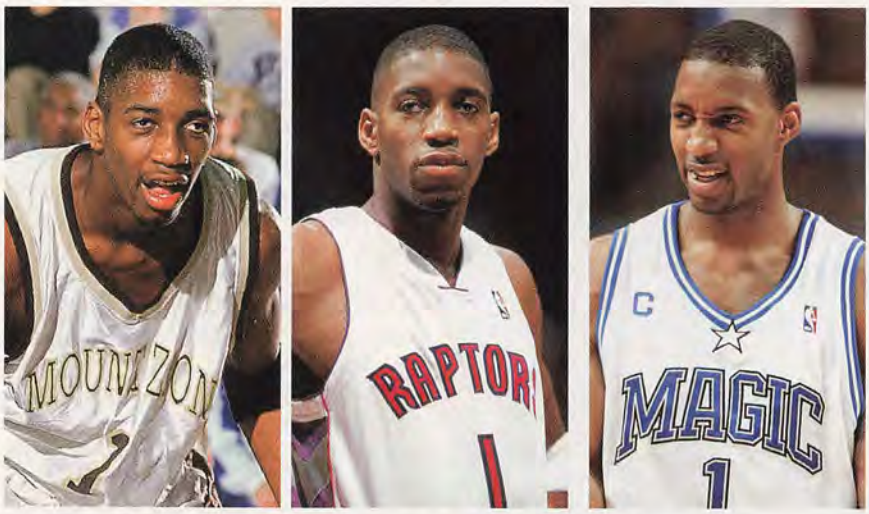
Still, as he reminded us on Dec. 9, when he scored 13 points in the last 35 seconds to almost single-handedly erase a 13-point deficit in an 81–80 win over the San Antonio Spurs, McGrady might be the best pure scorer in the game. And it is this stretch with this team, with Yao as his running mate, that will determine if he's ultimately worthy of inclusion with the alltime greats, if he'll ever be mentioned in the same breath as Magic and Michael. If not, if he can't become the centerpiece of a title team, he will likely go down as just another entertaining scorer—think George Gervin or David Thompson—who came up short.

"Right now you can't even mention me in the same breath with Magic or Michael," McGrady says.

It is pointed out to him that neither of them owned his own plane.

McGrady laughs. "True, true."

"Some nights I did slack off," says McGrady of last season. "I'm the leader, and these guys are following my lead, so the **WHOLE TEAM SUFFERS EVEN WORSE**. That was wrong. Now I would do it differently. I learned. I have to bust my butt no matter what."



A CHANGING IMAGE After leaving Mount Zion as an 18-year-old, McGrady battled though charges of laziness in Toronto and the pressures of being a one-man show in Orlando.

IN A hotel suite in Los Angeles, McGrady sits on the edge of his bed in front of a room service trolley, picking at a plate of pasta. His cholesterol is too high, he laments. His nutritionist has taken him off fried foods and sugar. Still, he looks disappointed as he jabs noodles with his fork. ESPN breaks into its programming to show replays of the brawl between the Indiana Pacers and the fans in Detroit. The melee is shown over and over. "This is terrible," McGrady says, "just terrible."

Yes, agrees his visitor. It's bad for the league, the players, the fans.

He looks up, slightly incredulous. "No, this *linguine*," he says. "It's terrible."

O.K. But what *does* he think about Ron Artest going into the stands? About fans throwing beer at players? After all, this

LEFT TO RIGHT: JIM GUND; BILL FRAKES; MANNY MILLAN

Dave got off the couch a year ago.

He hasn't been back on it since.

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brawl, along with Latrell Sprewell's recent complaint over being offered only $7 million by the Minnesota Timberwolves and Kobe Bryant's ongoing bizarre behavior, has made the divide between fan and player as wide as it's ever been.

McGrady pushes away his plate. "What Ron did? That was self-defense," he says. "Look, it goes both ways. As a player, I know not to put my business out there, not to embarrass myself, [because] if you do, you're going to get bad publicity. Like what Spree said, I understand that, but there is another way of saying it. So I have to be careful. But fans need to be respectful, can't be running on the court. That's my office. If I go to your office and I'm stepping to you, you're not gonna hit me?"

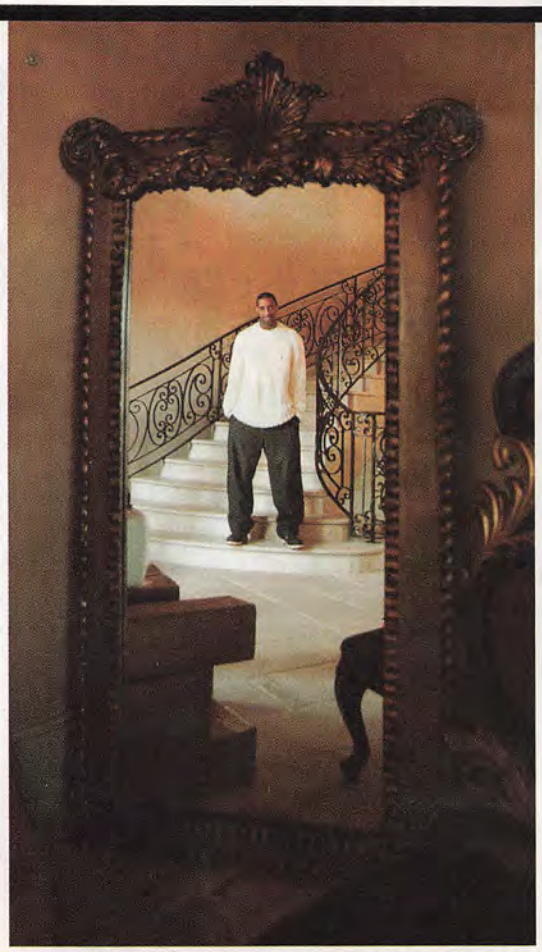
McGrady says he wants to reach out to fans. He also knows that he has to. His lifestyle—the BMWs, Bentleys and Maybachs, that Falcon 2000, the gold watches, the properties strewn across the Southeast—is not paid for by salary alone. He earns at least $7 million annually by lending his name and image to Adidas and PepsiCo. For him to justify that income, people must do more than watch him: They have to *love* him. Or at least be moved enough by him to buy his sneaker, and Adidas's new T-Mac 4 (retail: $125) was among the hottest basketball shoes of the Christmas shopping season. And if he becomes too remote, he knows, his whole empire is in jeopardy. He has to keep reaching out to his fans, what Karl Rove would call taking care of the base.

"I know I have to keep up my image," McGrady says, standing in the kitchen of his Sugar Land house, picking through a bag of sandwiches. "It's all about how you handle the situation. Last year I led the league in scoring. If I had been on a bad team and had a bad year statistically, then you would have seen my image collapse. I had to lead the league."

He pulls a hamburger in a clear plastic container out of the sack. Pausing a moment, as if to consider his nutritionist's advice, he pops open the container and takes a bite. All over the house there are pictures of his one-year-old daughter—curly hair, beautiful brown eyes and a cupid's bow of a mouth. "You got kids?" McGrady asks his visitor, who replies that his five-year-old is performing in a school show later that week.

"I can't wait for that," McGrady says, "for Layla to begin doing that stuff. To go to see her in shows, so I can go do all that with her. I love it. I love being her dad."

Never mind that this kitchen is as big as many houses or that an indoor basketball court is down the hall or that his private jet is parked a few miles away. For a moment, anyway, he's just a dad, a guy eating a hamburger who says he wants to do his job better, a guy who says he wants us to appreciate him more. Is it possible he's more like us than we think? □



WALTER IOOSS JR.

UPON REFLECTION The 25-year-old McGrady is facing up to the fact that his challenge in Houston is make-or-break.

On pasta,

on a burrito,

on a taco salad.

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Tampa Bay to Tatarstan

Five months after they raised the Stanley Cup, Vincent Lecavalier and Brad Richards joined other locked-out NHL stars on the best team rubles can buy

BY MICHAEL FARBER

As cold water is to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far place.

—RUSSIAN PROVERB, FROM OLD TESTAMENT

THE FIRST thing Vincent Lecavalier sees out the window of his hotel suite every morning is the beatific blue of a mosque that looms within the low walls of an ancient citadel. Four minarets stand sentinel around the spectacular snow-dusted dome, and when the winter sky turns from dirty dishwater to deep black each afternoon, gaily colored lights come on and change the Kul-Sharif mosque from a house of worship into a theme park for the soul. Lecavalier, a pillar of the Stanley Cup–champion Tampa Bay Lightning, grew up in suburban Montreal, where the Forum was

OUT IN THE COLD Richards (opposite) and Lecavalier, before Kazan's mosque, traveled 5,200 miles to find the best league.

Photographs by Bob Martin

considered the temple of hockey—a provincial conceit if you juxtapose that old barn with the religious eye candy in Lecavalier's temporary home eight time zones to the east. "It's like a palace," he says. "Every time I look at it, it reminds me I'm far away."

The mosque and surrounding fortress are the heart of Kazan, a 1,000-year-old city in the Republic of Tatarstan. Here, more than 450 years ago, the Russian tsar Ivan the Terrible defeated the progeny of the Golden Horde in a pivotal battle that had nothing to do with a salary cap, 24% rollbacks or arbitration rights. While a ruinous lockout imperiled the NHL season back in North America, Lecavalier and his Tampa Bay teammate Brad Richards followed their competitive and capitalist instincts to a city where Lenin once studied. They became the farthest-flung wanderers in hockey's new diaspora, having ventured almost halfway around the world to a place that four months ago they couldn't have picked out on a globe had you spotted them the *K* and the *a*. Lecavalier's and Richards's experience in this city of 1.2 million, 500 miles east of Moscow, is a metaphor for the NHL, which has no idea where *it* is at the moment either.

For now, at least, Kazan is hockey's Mecca, where you can cross the street to pray in a mosque and then, if you have 135 rubles (a little less than $5) in your jeans, you can walk three minutes to an arena suited to junior hockey and see the sexiest team in the world—Ak Bars Kazan—play the game at its highest level.

Even before the NHL began its fiscal death match, the 16-team Russian Superleague had earned the reputation as the second-best league in the world. Of course, being considered the second-best hockey league a year ago was equivalent to a fork being considered the second-best utensil with which to eat soup. But then NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and players' association executive director Bob Goodenow began toasting each other with Jonestown fruit punch. When the lockout was declared on Sept. 15, Russia, which sent 46 players to the NHL in 2003–04, became the pros' destination of choice.

HOOKED Ak Bars's Morozov (95) and other NHL players are irked by the stickwork and diving that are typical of the Superleague, but Russian fans are eating up the game.

Think about it. Fifteen years after Slava Fetisov and Igor Larionov fought the Soviet system as valiantly as they played on the ice and earned the right to spend their twilight years in North America, traffic is flowing the other way. To hell with Lenin and Trotsky. The real Russian Revolution is the change in allegiance from the CCCP (the cyrillic initials of the U.S.S.R.) to CCM (the hockey company) within one generation. "And if the [NHL] season is canceled," says Ak Bars defenseman Darius Kasparaitis, who played for the New York Rangers in less ironic times, "you'll see 100 more guys trying to sign in Russia."

Kazan is the epicenter: Hockeygrad-near-the-Volga. Even accounting for Superleague rules that allow no more than three non-Russians in the lineup, Ak Bars's wanton talent grab dwarfs any notion of world domination the New York Yankees ever entertained. Ak Bars, 20-14-3 and in fourth place in the Superleague standings through Sunday, is the best team rubles can buy. Besides Richards, who returned to North America last month for treatment of a sports hernia but intends to rejoin Ak Bars soon, and Lecavalier, it has Nikolai Khabibulin, the Lightning's superb goalie; Ilya Kovalchuk, the mercurial Atlanta Thrashers left wing; Alexei Kovalev, the ridiculously gifted free-agent winger; Kasparaitis, the rambunctious Lithuanian blueliner on whom the Rangers lavished a six-year, $25.5 million contract in '02; and six other players who were in the NHL last season, including goalie Fred Brathwaite. According to Ak Bars officials, Czech sniper Jaromir Jagr, who is with Avangard Omsk, inquired about playing in Kazan but was rebuffed. Jagr's agent, J.P. Barry, says Kazan was just one of several places Jagr was interested in. In any event, Ak Bars did not want hockey's spoiled child—Ak Bars wanted Canadians.

"I really like Canadian hockey players,"

"I REALLY LIKE CANADIAN HOCKEY PLAYERS," SAYS COACH BIL (RIGHT). "WHEN THEY'RE BORN, THEY COME FROM HOCKEY. THEY PLAY WITH HEART ALL THE TIME."

ity that marks Canada's game. The team sets its sights on Lecavalier, the most valuable player in the recent World Cup, and Richards, the Conn Smythe Trophy winner for the 2004 playoffs. A few North Americans had drifted to Russia in the past several years, end-of-the-roaders like goalie André (Red Light) Racicot and forward Jim Montgomery, names familiar only to serious puckheads. Lecavalier and Richards were something new in the Superleague,

says coach Zinetula Bilelyadinov, widely known as Coach Bil. "When they're born, they come from hockey. They play with heart all the time."

Ak Bars—the name means *snow leopard* in the Tatar language—values not merely talent but seriousness of purpose, the qual-

NHL players on the cusp of greatness. Lecavalier is a big, strong center, an instinctive player who does not need to carry the puck to be effective. Richards is a center–right wing with an impressive hockey IQ who scores and passes and invariably makes his linemates better.

Lecavalier and Richards were on their way to a Yankees playoff game against the Red Sox in the Bronx, guests of George Steinbrenner, when reports on Ak Bars from two NHL scouts arrived via e-mail on Richards's BlackBerry. One was wildly positive. Good news from a far place.

As Ak Bars kept landing marquee players—Kovalchuk and Kasparaitis and especially Khabibulin—signing up started to make more sense to a pair of 24-year-olds who had been hardwired to play hockey. Maybe the game had fallen down a rabbit hole. But as Nikolai Ladygin, a Toronto Maple Leafs scout and one of their coaches a decade ago at Notre Dame College in Saskatchewan, told them, they had a chance "to kill three rabbits: play hockey, make money, see Russia." So on the final Saturday of November, their brains fogged by jet lag and their bodies cloaked in Ak Bars white, green and red, the colors of the Tatarstan flag, they stood on the blue line with their new teammates as the first notes of the Russian national anthem sounded.

Lecavalier stifled a grin before quickly regaining an appropriately respectful gaze. Later he explained that the anthem had made him think of *Rocky IV*.

It is better to have 100 friends than 100 rubles.

—RUSSIAN PROVERB

THE SHOWDOWN between No. 1 Dynamo and No. 2 Ak Bars is not ending well for Kazan. Kovalchuk rams a Dynamo player along the boards 92 seconds into overtime, drawing a minor penalty for roughing, and then offers his assessment of the referee's work from a distance of about three inches, earning a second penalty, for misconduct. The calls might be subject to interpretation, but Kovalchuk's meltdown is not—nor is the puck Khabibulin fires in the general direction of the ref seconds after Dynamo scores and the incensed goalie fishes it out of his net. Dynamo 3, Ak Bars 2. The Moscow team skates off the Kazan ice in a hail of spit and venom, abuse no less startling than the taunts directed at the reluctant headliner of the night, the beleaguered zebra. According to Ak Bars players, who are all too willing to translate, the fans are chanting, "The referee's a faggot."

"Russia," Kasparaitis notes, "is not PG-13."

Twelve hours after this horror show, which ended a Bars unbeaten streak of nine

games, Hockey Morning in Russia does not look very fine—unless you count the fine of 60,000 rubles (about $2,000) Kovalchuk has been assessed for his penalties. The club posts it in the dressing room as a warning. Ak Bars is not happy, which means Ravil Shavaleyev is not happy.

Shavaleyev is the team's vice president and its architect. Of the 144 million people in Russia, probably the last one you want to annoy, besides President Vladimir Putin, is the compact, 47-year-old Shavaleyev—a former Kazan defenseman nicknamed the Mad Tatar. His vigor is beyond dispute. He bristles when he walks. He bristles even when he sits in his sleek second-floor office. He can be extraordinarily gracious (Ak Bars plans to take the team to a resort in Dubai during a February break in the schedule), but he could make caffeine jittery. Club employees stiffen when Shavaleyev sweeps past. By way of explanation, Ak Bars defenseman Sergei Klimentiev, a Ukrainian who played three seasons with Rochester in the American Hockey League, offers this: He earns $600,000 a year; his mother, a pediatrician in Kiev, earns $60 a month. You irk the organization at your peril. Early this season spare forward Danis Zaripov was caught with two beers on a charter flight, in violation of team rules. He was fined two weeks' salary, a stiff tab for a team named Bars.

Of course, Zaripov's exact salary is shrouded in secrecy. Indeed, disclosing contract information might be Russia's last taboo. The reticence about money—"This subject is out of discussion," Shavaleyev says—has led to wild speculation about Ak Bars's profligacy. The Russian press whispers that the team is spending $50 million this season, an unprecedented amount in Russian hockey. This has been reported in North American newspapers as a payroll figure, but it's more likely the team's budget, which presumably includes operating expenses such as cars and apartments for players and bonuses like the $2,000 per player for road wins and $1,500 for home wins.

Regardless, let us do some arithmetic concerning the NHL players playing in Kazan. Richards, who would have made about $2.6 million in Tampa Bay this season, and Lecavalier, who was scheduled to earn $4.4 million, each will earn $1.5 million if the NHL does not return to action. Kovalchuk, who has been with Ak Bars since September, could earn $3 million. According to a source with knowledge of the contracts, Ak Bars's 12 NHL players will together earn something in the neighborhood of $15 million. The non–NHL Russians likely will earn between $175,000 and $600,000 each. The payroll is probably no more than $22 million, well below Bettman's proposed salary cap, and about $1 million less than the Nashville Predators' payroll last season.

But even a $10 million payroll in Kazan would be a guaranteed megaloser. If Ak Bars sold all 4,000 seats at all 30 regular-season home games—the top ticket costs about $10—revenue would be in the neighborhood of $1 million. The concession stands (most are folding tables set up in the arena corridors) do not exactly gouge the customers: A cup of tea costs less than 20 cents, a hot dog about 45 cents. There is some advertising signage in the arena and a glassed-in café overlooking the ice, but nothing remotely resembling a luxury suite. In the context of the geopolitical "realities" of this fascinating country, though, Superleague economics have a weird logic.

HANGING IN THERE Living in an apartment, struggling with Russian and getting little ice time, Brathwaite has not warmed to Kazan.

There are two Russias. There is workaday Russia, a country so frugal that a 50-ish bottle-blonde waitress upbraided Lecavalier in Russian for leaving a hunk of beet and a spoonful of broth in his otherwise empty bowl of borscht. Then there is a Russia as fantastic as the Kul-Sharif mosque, a land in which Kazan, where the average family gets by on 5,000 rubles ($166) a month, will spend drunkenly to win a championship. Officially the title will be a gift to mark the millennium of the city's founding in 1005—a choice between making 100 friends and pocketing 100 rubles. At least that's the story. As Shavaleyev says, "This [lockout] happens once every 10 years. I don't know when we'll see many of the players again in Russia. For us it's a celebration. A hockey holiday." And who doesn't spend a little extra on holiday?

Ak Bars is one of the arriviste powers in Russian hockey. Once the fiefdom of Moscow clubs—CSKA, the famous Red Army team; Dynamo, the KGB club; and Spartak, backed by trade unions—the sport has followed the money since the breakup of the Soviet Union and the yard sale of nationalized industries to the "oligarchs," Russia's business elite. The past 13 Superleague titles have been shared by Dynamo, Avangard Omsk (an oil team owned by renowned oligarch Roman Abramovich), Metallurg Magnitogorsk (steel mill), Lada Togliatti (automaker), Lokomotiv Yaroslavl (railways ministry) and Ak Bars, which began life in 1956 as Mashstroi (a combination of the words for *car* and *build*) and won the title in '98. For cities such as Kazan and Omsk, well outside the political and economic hub of Moscow, a glamorous team is "a great propaganda tool," says Nikolai Petrov, an expert on Russia's regions for the Carnegie think tank in the Russian capital. Theoretically their success also helps them curry favor with Putin, who, like his Soviet predecessors, has been promoting sport as a national ideal. "If the businessmen show they're putting money into sports," Russian political commentator Yulia Latynina says, "they know the government will ask fewer questions about where they got their money and how much they're paying in taxes."

Although last June the president of Tatarstan announced a large-scale project to develop local players and reduce the dependency on NHL imports—sounds like oil, doesn't it?—Ak Bars plowed ahead in the second week of December by signing Sabres defenseman Alexei Zhitnik, whose tidy first passes can kick-start an attack. Zhitnik was just another chip, raising the stakes in what is already a colossal gamble. If the NHL resumes play, Ak Bars, set to move into a new 10,500-seat arena next season, could implode, losing all its NHL players except

Brathwaite and Alexei Morozov, who have no escape clauses in their contracts. Of course, if the NHL stays dark, the pressure really intensifies. "There is no doubt we will reach the final," Shavaleyev says of the league's eight-team postseason that ends in March. "The players might fail, but we didn't make any mistakes in taking them." Apparently Shavaleyev is Tatar for *Steinbrenner*.

All of which made the overtime loss to Dynamo hard to digest, much harder than the food at Venetsia, a splendid Italian restaurant five minutes from the Kazan rink. With the addition of seven NHLers in November, Kovalev decided to nudge along the bonding process by taking all the players and their wives and girlfriends—about 40 people—out for a postgame meal that was, by all accounts, quiet. The decibel level did not increase until 5:30 the next afternoon, when Shavaleyev marched into the dressing room and berated the team because of the amount of alcohol on the bill. According to players, he had phoned Venetsia more than once during the evening to ascertain exactly how much booze was being ordered.

Gee, what is this, Russia?

To run away is not glorious, but very healthy.
—RUSSIAN PROVERB

AK BARS travels on a chartered Tatarstan Airlines jet, a YAK-42, which, despite appearances, refers to the model of the airplane and not the year it was built. The jet is superior to many others in the Russian sky—most domestic flights are no-frills to the point that you swear they'll demand exact change as you board—but it is not quite the luxurious ride that NHL players expect. Playing in the Superleague means making do: bringing to the rink your own soap and towels, and in the case of the visitors' dressing room in Togliatti, your own toilet seat. It means bunking in hotel beds so narrow that, in Voskresensk, Lecavalier's shoulders hung over the edges; gulping tasteless chicken-and-plain-spaghetti meals before every game; and taking mandatory pregame naps in the *baza*, the team base, on linen so coarse that it chafes the cheeks.

OF THE 144 MILLION PEOPLE IN RUSSIA, THE LAST ONE YOU WANT TO ANNOY, BESIDES PRESIDENT PUTIN, IS SHAVALEYEV (LEFT). HE BRISTLES WHEN HE WALKS. HE BRISTLES EVEN WHEN HE SITS IN HIS SLEEK OFFICE.

"Every day," Lecavalier says, "you see a little something you've never seen before."

True. This is a country where the referee can't go upstairs to review a goal, but upstairs can come down to them. Against Khimik Voskresensk, Lecavalier flicked a backhander that seemed to cross the goal line. The referee ordered a video review. He entered the penalty box, made himself comfortable in front of the monitor, studied a replay and then called for more angles. The Khimik video-camera operator, perched on the roof of the four-seat press box, clambered down with his Panasonic, climbed through the stands, skirted the Zamboni entrance (where he was momentarily detained by a bull-necked security guard) and trotted to the box, where he set up his camera for the ref's perusal. The review took 14 minutes. In video replay, that's *War and Peace*.

Lecavalier's goal is waved off. Leading 2–0 midway through the third period, Khabibulin allows a softie on a seemingly innocuous shoot-in from the red line, and Ak Bars comes unglued. The players stop skating, give up another goal 2½ minutes later and lose on a goal by former NHLer Valeri Kamensky with 75 seconds left. Coach Bil is distraught. In the near-empty bus after the game, he asks, in plaintive English, "Where are my NHL players, my NHL stars?" At that moment he probably would like to ship everybody to Siberia, which is, in fact, where they are headed on the YAK-42 red-eye for a nationally televised game against Omsk two days later. This time Ak Bars squanders a 3–0 lead against Jagr's team. Avangard scores its fourth goal after the puck flies into its bench and is knocked back onto the ice by a player. This time the video review takes 10 minutes, a mere *Anna Karenina*. Avangard wins 5–4 on a goal in the final two minutes. With Ak Bars's loss, the best team rubles can buy slips to third place in the Superleague standings. The last time a Russian road trip went this badly, Napoleon was the coach.

Still, while stretching before the Avangard match, Richards recounted an argument he had had with Lecavalier. "He was telling me he'd rather play in Kazan than in a couple of NHL cities," Richards said. "I just had to walk away." Unlike Lecavalier, who has programmed the Russian anthem as his cell phone ring, Richards had difficulty wrapping his mind around his winter hockey va-

MINI-MECCA Kazan, with its cheerleaders and big screen, is now a center of world-class hockey, but for NHL players it's still small-time.

cation. Certainly being benched in the third period of his first game after his unit scored a power-play goal against Magnitogorsk did nothing to assuage his doubts. That night at dinner he said, "I've got Russian journalists asking me why I was benched. It's embarrassing. As I recall, [Ak Bars] called me, I didn't call them." Two weeks into his stay Richards said he liked his teammates, the organization and the game despite the fact that hooking on the ice is even more flagrant than the hooking at the Omsk Tourist Hotel.

Every morning—until his injury chased him home—he woke to his view of the mosque. "It's not like I hate this country," said Richards, who, when he boarded the YAK-42 for the first time, pantomimed blowing his brains out. "I just know I could be home right now, in my new house, watching football. Vinny's different. He lived in a hotel in Montreal this summer and one in Boston a few years ago.

"I have stuff here"—Internet access and books and enough DVDs to last two lockouts—"but I need something else. I've learned that family and friends are a lot more important." Despite his initial misgivings, Richards told SI last week that he's making every effort to get back to Kazan.

Because he was cocooned at a fabulous five-star hotel in Kazan (he and Lecavalier were about $10,000 out-of-pocket for the privilege) Richards was less susceptible to the humiliating infantilization that bedevils Brathwaite. The goalie, who earns $600,000, lives in an apartment like most of the Ak Bars players. Unlike them, however, he must negotiate daily life with a vocabulary of fewer than 50 Russian words. He is 32 going on two, forced to point to what he wants in stores and restaurants or to depend on teammates for translation. Brathwaite, the first black hockey player in a country with notoriously poor race relations—Anson Carter was greeted by a banana thrown on the ice when his barnstorming NHL Worldstars played in St. Petersburg last month—has been further marginalized by the arrival of Khabibulin in November. "Nik's great, one of the best goalies in the world," Brathwaite says, "but I didn't come here to watch hockey. If I wanted to watch, I could have stayed home [in Ottawa] and watched the [junior] 67s." Picking at his lunch late one snowy Sunday afternoon, he adds, "I came to Russia with my mind open and my eyes closed. It hasn't been as much fun as I thought."

Indeed there is a distinct paucity of fun, which occasionally is doled out one beer at a time. During one of those habitual delays at the Samara Airport after a win against Lada, Brathwaite asks Coach Bil's permission to buy his teammates a beer in honor of his 32nd birthday that day. He agrees to the beer, shocking most of his Russian players. But the strangest thing about the Ak Bars experience—stranger, for instance, than being chided by a cabbie after the game for buckling a seat belt—is that NHLers from the old Soviet Union seem more ambivalent about it than North Americans. For the blunt Kasparaitis, the problem is the rampant diving and the lack of bodychecking. For most of the others, it is the remnants of the old Soviet-style approach to players. "In the NHL you do what you want as long as you're ready to play. You're treated like men, like professionals," says Kovalchuk. "Here they know everything about you, keep an eye on you wherever you go. Bil's an old-style Russian coach, big time."

Adds Khabibulin, "Bottom line: The money's [better than it used to be], but the mentality's the same."

In a country where money is none of your damn business, it was the primary draw for NHLers. Jagr's dislike for the old Communist authorities was so great that he carried a picture of Ronald Reagan in his wallet and adopted number 68 in honor of the Prague Spring. Yet in November, he left his hometown team in Kladno, Czechoslovakia after 17 games, because national loyalty does not pay the bills—a seven-figure salary from Avangard does. Brathwaite could use a solid season with Ak Bars as a springboard to a backup job in the NHL, but a large part of Russia's allure was a salary greater than he made last season in Columbus. Kovalchuk, who would be in his fourth season with Atlanta, probably will earn more with Ak Bars than he would have with the Thrashers.

Still, Ak Bars's NHLers keep checking the Internet, trolling for gossip about a lockout that has sent many players back to a homeland that feels foreign now. This spring there might be Superleague title for Bars, a historic birthday present for Kazan, but the team's players are getting itchy as the NHL's drop-dead date nears. Running away is more healthy than glorious, but going home is not always an unalloyed blessing either. "How difficult," asks Kasparaitis, "is it to put a toilet seat in a rink? □

LANGUAGE LAB Kovalchuk (71) could always spell his name in Cyrillic. Now Lecavalier (4) and Richards can spell theirs too.

"I HAVE STUFF HERE"—INTERNET ACCESS, BOOKS, ENOUGH DVDS FOR TWO LOCKOUTS—"BUT I NEED SOMETHING ELSE," SAID RICHARDS. "FAMILY AND FRIENDS ARE A LOT MORE IMPORTANT."

In his pursuit of a master's degree in Theological Studies from Berkeley, Vince Patton could surround himself in the comforts of the library, the classroom, or the chapel. But true to the values he attempts to instill in his own students, Vince spends six weeks a year volunteering in a small village in Haiti, where he labors in conditions far less plush than he finds on campus in order to provide food, clothing, and medicine to poor villagers. For as Vince learned during his 30 years in the U.S. Coast Guard, values aren't what you get out of an experience, they're what you put in.

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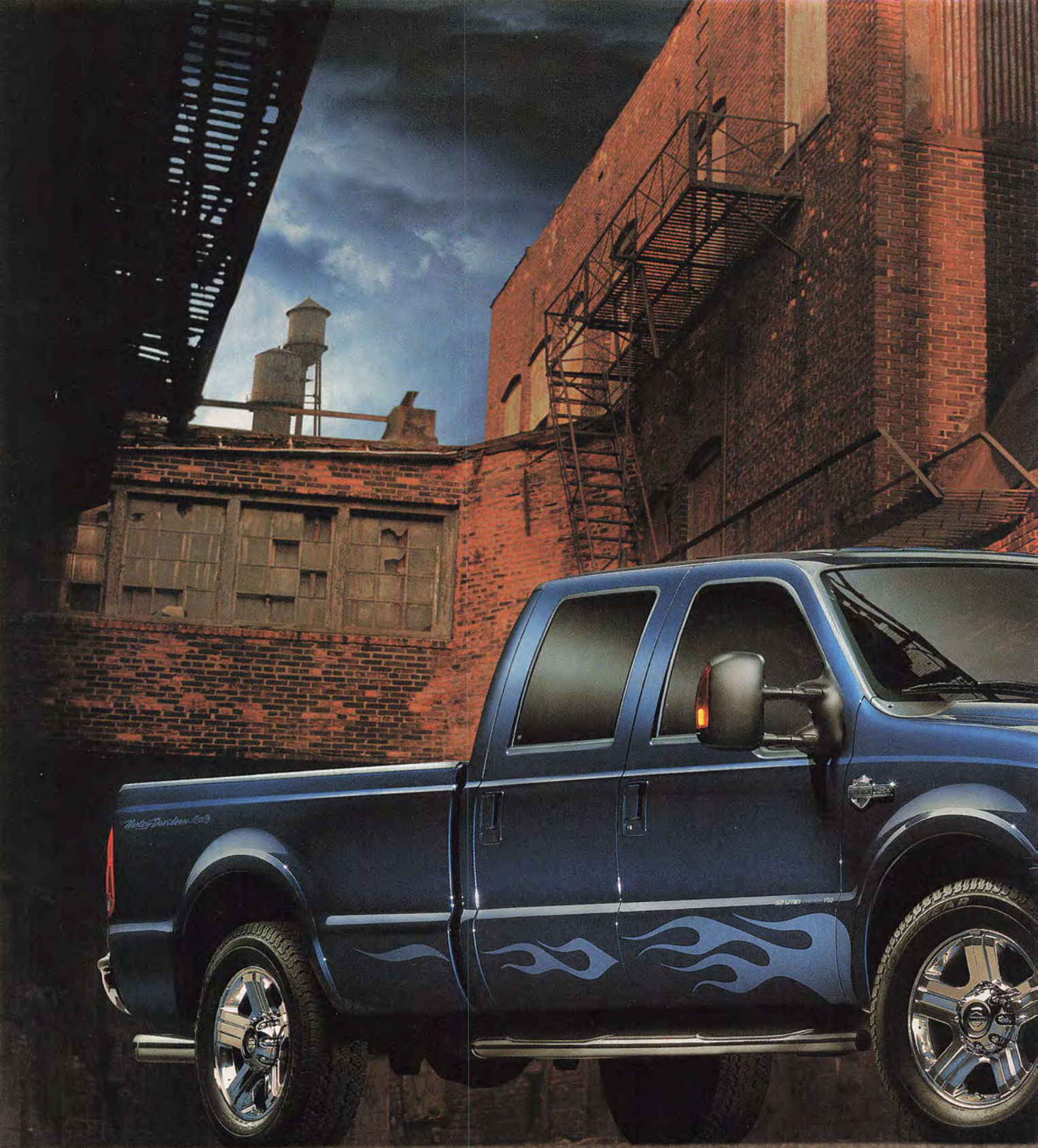

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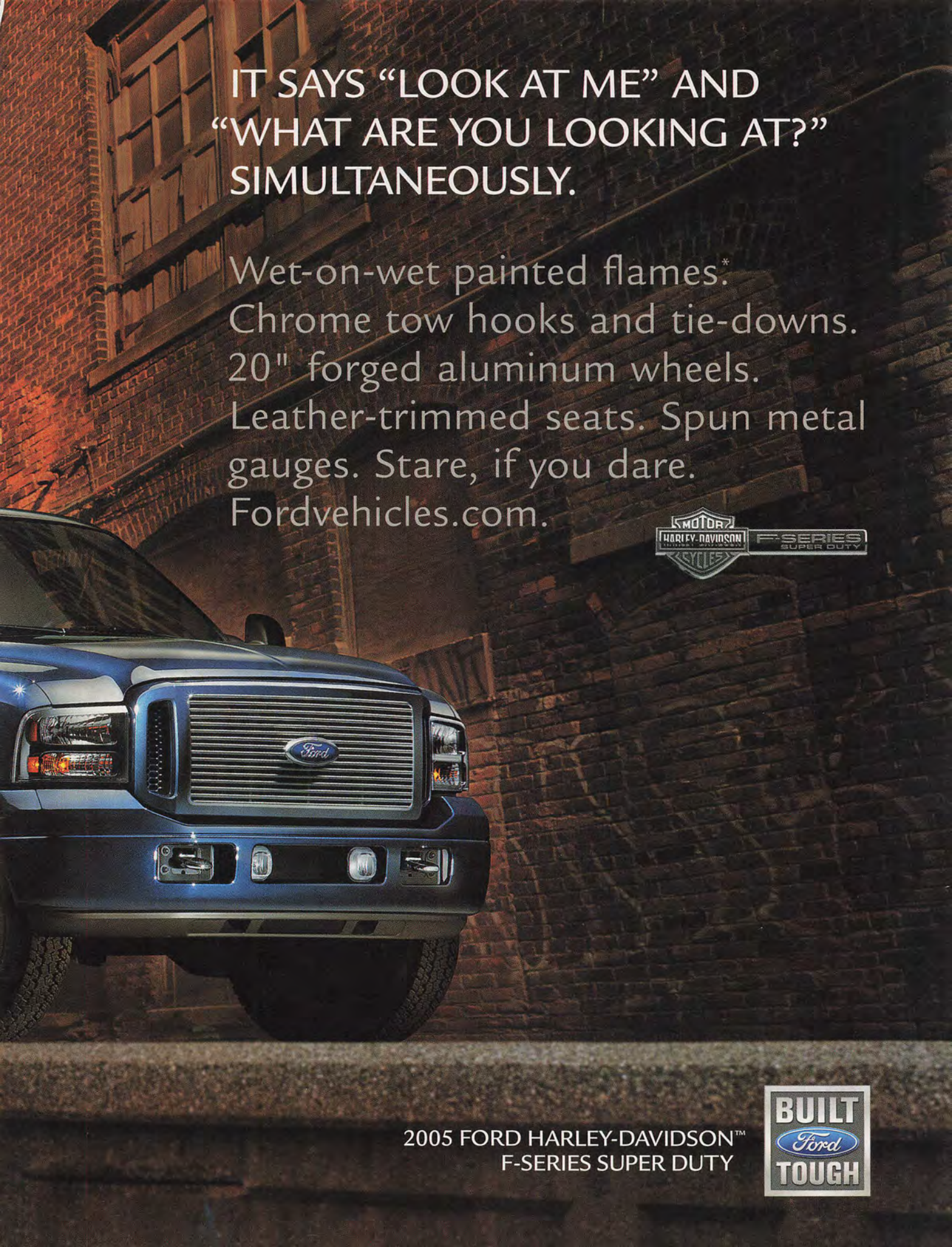
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COLLEGE BASKETBALL

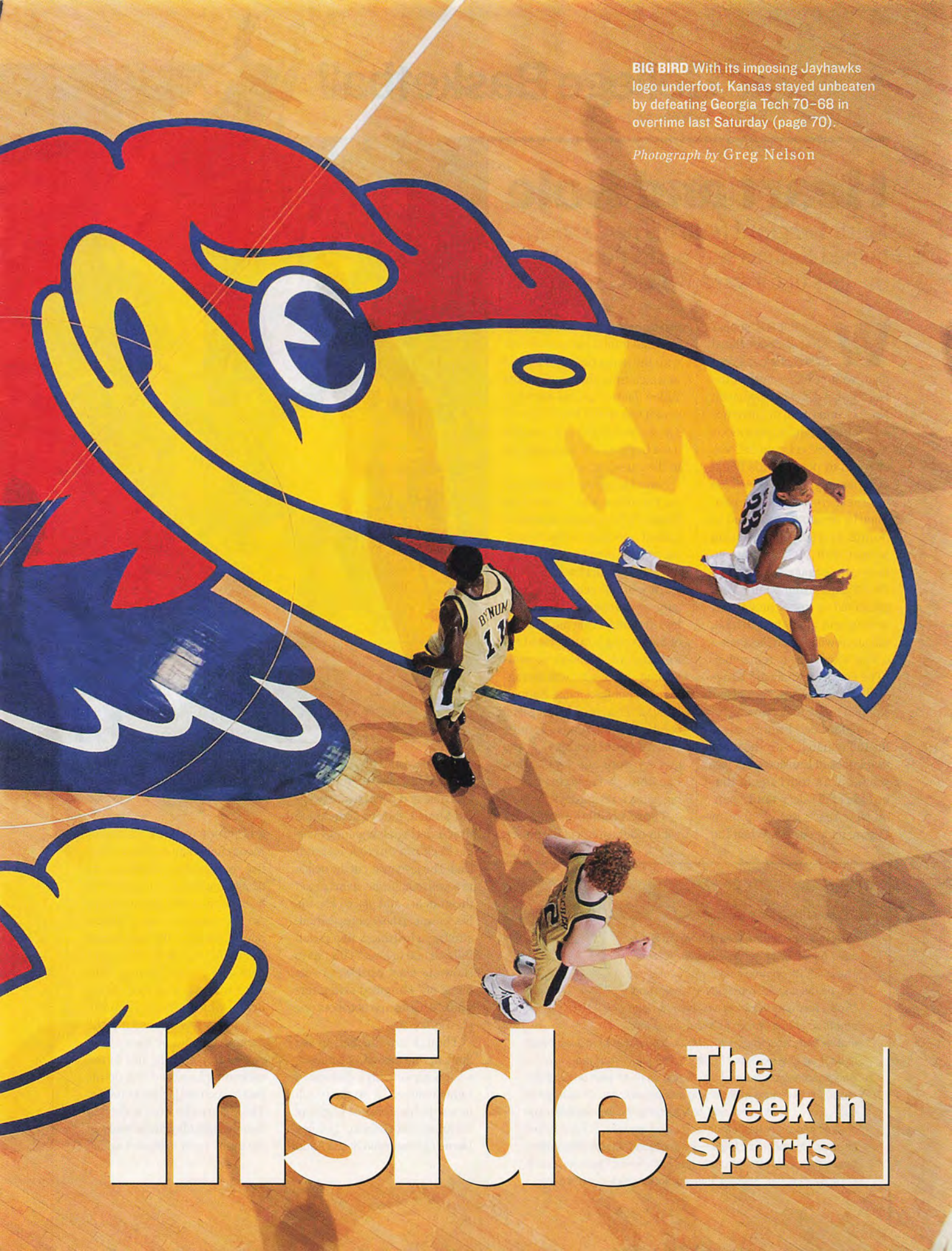
Kansas stays perfect behind Keith Langford • UConn women off to a slow start • Oklahoma State lacks an inside presence

BASEBALL

Decision day nears for prize free agent Carlos Beltran • Some other big names—Delgado, Ordoñez—are still on the market

THE NBA

Wizards surge thanks to guards • Bucks' T.J. Ford ponders his uncertain future • Jazz can't overcome loss of Andrei Kirilenko



BIG BIRD With its imposing Jayhawks logo underfoot, Kansas stayed unbeaten by defeating Georgia Tech 70–68 in overtime last Saturday (page 70).

Photograph by Greg Nelson

Inside

The Week In Sports

by Kelli Anderson

Heart and Sole

Keith Langford (and his new shoes) helped Kansas stay perfect despite the loss of forward Wayne Simien

WAS IT THE shoes? After Kansas guard Keith Langford scored just two first-half points in the No. 2 Jayhawks' showdown with No. 9 Georgia Tech in Lawrence last Saturday, the superstitious senior made a beeline to the locker room to perform his usual luck-changing ritual: He replaced his sneakers with a new pair. Then he went out and scored 16 points, including a twisting jumper with 3.3 seconds to go in overtime that gave Kansas a 70–68 come-from-behind win, preserved an undefeated (9–0) season and gave the raucous, sellout crowd at Allen Fieldhouse a New Year's Day to remember. "The new shoes helped," Langford said afterward, "but also I stopped trying to do too much."

Langford had been so eager for the rematch with the team that knocked Kansas out of last year's NCAA tournament that he didn't fall asleep until 3 a.m. on New Year's Eve, despite an 11 p.m. team curfew. When the two teams met last March, Langford had fouled out in overtime with the game tied, and he had to watch from the bench as the Yellow Jackets pulled ahead to earn a trip to the Final Four. "I always wondered what might have happened if I had stayed in the game," he says.

Saturday's game wasn't do-or-die for either team, but it was Kansas's first game against a ranked opponent without leading scorer Wayne Simien, the Jayhawks' All-America senior forward who is recovering from surgery to repair a ligament in his left thumb. That meant more of the scoring burden would fall to Langford, Kansas's second-leading scorer, who was averaging 15.6 points a game through Sunday. "I had been hearing it all week—from friends, family, coaches, even strangers at the grocery store," he says. " 'Hey, Langford, you're gonna have a big game on Saturday!' "

Those predictions seemed wildly off the mark at the outset. As Langford and his teammates struggled to execute their new penetrate-and-pitch offense (without Simien, they've abandoned their usual high-low game), Georgia Tech ran out to a 16-point lead. The Jayhawks cut the deficit to seven at halftime, then spread their offense and played like the No. 2 team in the country, demonstrating a grittiness that coach Bill Self had to love. "This has to show our team what we are capable of," Langford said afterward. "This team is not about one person."

Though it pains Self to see Simien, who missed 22 games as a sophomore with a dislocated right shoulder, sit on the bench in a suit, his absence is giving freshmen Alex Galindo, C.J. Giles, Darnell Jackson and Sasha Kaun and junior walk-on Christian Moody important experience. The five combined for 18 points and 22 rebounds on Saturday. "We've been hot and cold this season in part because our young players haven't played at the level I think they can," says Self. "Though I hate it for Wayne, playing without him forces us to develop depth, which I think will make us better in February and March."

Simien could be back at the end of this month, and in the meantime Langford will do his part to keep the Jayhawks rolling. The hightops he wore in the first half on Saturday are already in the trash, "never to be seen again,"

RUBY SLIPPERS Langford (5) had the magic touch as Kansas avenged its Georgia Tech loss.

GREG NELSON (LANGFORD); AL TIELEMANS (WARRICK)

Pro Prospects

NBA scouts evaluate the potential of Syracuse All-America forward **Hakim Warrick**. The 6′ 8″, 219-pound senior was averaging 20.1 points and 8.9 rebounds at week's end: *"He's a very unorthodox player, being so long and thin, and he doesn't have a game that makes him position-specific: He doesn't have three-man range or ball handling skills, but he also doesn't have four-man size. . . . Another question is his ability to play man-to-man defense because for four years at Syracuse he's played zone. I'll assume he can learn. . . . On the plus side, he's probably the most athletic player in all of college basketball, and he competes. . . . I don't think he's going to start in our league—he's not good enough offensively—but as far as his size, strength and skinniness, I just don't care. I'm a Warrick fan."* **Verdict:** Possible lottery pick but not a star.

he says. Kansas fans are hoping that the magic in his new pair can continue.

CHAMPS' STRUGGLES

Much Ails UConn Women

Everyone thought Connecticut would be a different team without two-time national player of the year Diana Taurasi, but no one expected the Huskies to be mediocre. After losing on the road to No. 9 North Carolina and unranked Arizona State, and needing overtime to beat unranked South Florida at home, the three-time defending national champions fell out of the Top 10 for the first time in nearly 11 years on Dec. 27. Two days later UConn was thrashed 67–51 by No. 10 Michigan State in Hartford as disappointed fans headed for the exits with five minutes left in the game. "That has to be the worst feeling a player who puts on a Connecticut uniform could ever have," said junior forward Barbara Turner, who was averaging 13.4 points a game at week's end to lead the team in scoring. It was the Huskies' worst home loss in almost 13 years, and it marked the first time UConn had lost three games before January since the 1991–92 season, when Rebecca Lobo was a freshman. Only by beating unranked St. John's 60–32 on Sunday did the Huskies (7–3) avoid ruining another glorious streak: It hasn't had back-to-back losses in 404 games.

What's the problem? The better question is, What isn't? At the moment the Huskies lack confidence, leadership and scoring. (They were averaging 67.7 points a game through Sunday, their lowest output in a decade.) As much as they miss Taurasi, they may miss her classmate, unheralded point guard Maria Conlon, even more. Coach Geno Auriemma, who says he is as frustrated as he has been in 20 years of coaching, has tried numerous lineups in search of a spark; during one four-game stretch he started four different point guards, including former walk-on Stacey Marron. (He has since settled on scrappy freshman Mel Thomas.)

To improve the team's anemic scoring, a desperate Auriemma has even increased the playing time of freshman Charde Houston—the top scorer in California high school history—even though her performance in practice hasn't been up to his standards. Meanwhile, UConn's five seniors look lost without Taurasi and Conlon in the backcourt, and they have yet to play with the swagger befitting players who have finished every one of their seasons as national champions. "For a large portion of their careers, there were other people doing the thinking for them," says Auriemma, "and now all the thinking has to be done by them, and they're struggling."

Things could get worse before they get better: The Huskies' next four games include visits from No. 10 Tennessee and No. 7 Texas and a trip to No. 4 Notre Dame. It may be a small comfort for Connecticut to know that its archrival is similarly foundering: Tennessee suffered its third loss of the season on Dec. 29 at Rutgers. When the Lady Vols play the Huskies this Saturday in Hartford, their meeting won't be the usual clash of titans but a desperate scramble to save face. □

HELP WANTED Turner (33), UConn's leading scorer, can't carry the offensive load alone.

BOB CHILD/AP (TURNER); M. DAVID LEEDS/US PRESSWIRE (PETTWAY); NICK WASS/AP (MENSAH-BONSU)

Seth Davis's Hoop Thoughts

MISSING COWBOY

Despite reaching the Final Four, Oklahoma State had a problem with post defense throughout last season. So when **Aaron Pettway** *(right)*, a record-setting 6′ 10″, 240-pound junior college center, signed to play for the Cowboys in April, the coaching staff believed it had found the missing piece to the national championship puzzle. "He may be the most important recruit we've had in a long time," associate head coach **Sean Sutton** said at the time. So where was Pettway during Oklahoma State's 78–75 loss to Gonzaga on Dec. 29? Right where he's been for most of this season: on the bench. Pettway had played a total of 35 minutes in the Cowboys' first 10 games, scoring 10 points and grabbing four rebounds. His lack of experience (he didn't play high school basketball) is compounded by a passive personality. "He'll play well for five- or 10-minute stretches in practice," Sutton says, "but then he'll disappear." If Pettway is still invisible when the NCAA tournament begins, the Cowboys will be exposed yet again as a very good team with a very conspicuous flaw.

INSTANT MESSAGING WITH . . .

. . . George Washington forward **Pops Mensah-Bonsu** *(below)*, a 6′ 9″, 240-pound junior who was averaging 15.3 points and 7.3 rebounds at week's end for the Colonials (8–2), who have upset Michigan State and Maryland.

SI: *Let's start with the obvious: How did you get the nickname Pops?*

Pops: Well, my name is Nana Papayaw Mensah-Bonsu; Pops is just short for Papayaw. It is what my parents have called me for as long as I can remember.

SI: *You grew up in London. Why aren't you a soccer player?*

Pops: I actually played soccer for the first 14 years of my life. If I don't make it in pro basketball, I might try out for D.C. United. I think I can do it.

SI: *I'm thinking of picking the Colonials as a Final Four sleeper. Am I crazy?*

Pops: No, you are not crazy. Anything can happen in March.

THREE-POINTER

1. **Steve Alford** is doing more than saving his skin. The Iowa coach has been on the hot seat for two years, but the Hawkeyes' 12–1 start hasn't just relieved the pressure on him, it's also made Alford the favorite for the Indiana job if **Mike Davis** doesn't survive.
2. Georgia Tech's **Jarrett Jack** is the best point guard in the country. His size (6′ 3″, 202 pounds) and efficiency (14.3 points and 4.7 assists a game, with a .598 field-goal percentage) give the Yellow Jackets an edge at that position no matter whom they play.
3. **N.C. State** is worse than anyone thought. Three losses in five games—including a 63–45 stinker against **St. John's** on Dec. 30, in which the Wolfpack scored 10 points in the first half—show that N.C. State doesn't have the chops to challenge for an ACC title.

More Hoop Thoughts from Seth Davis every Tuesday at **SI.com**.

Inside Baseball

by Albert Chen

Early Decision

Prize free agent Carlos Beltran must choose whether to wait out a bidding war or take the Astros' money and run

AT HIS current home run and stolen base pace, Carlos Beltran, 27, will by age 40 join Barry Bonds as the only members of the 500-500 club. That's one of many lofty projections included in the statistics-based tome that Beltran's agent, Scott Boras, has assembled and distributed to teams coveting his free-agent client. "No one needs a book to tell them how rare a player Beltran is," says one National League executive. "But is he worth the 10-year commitment that Boras has suggested? Is he worth more than [AL MVP] Vladimir Guerrero, who got a [five-year] $70 million deal [from the Angels] last year?"

As of Monday the Astros, who traded for the centerfielder last June, were reportedly the only team to have made an offer, somewhere between $70 million for five years and $96 million for six. But this week the bidding war will heat up, primarily because Houston must re-sign Beltran by Saturday or lose negotiating rights with him until May 1.

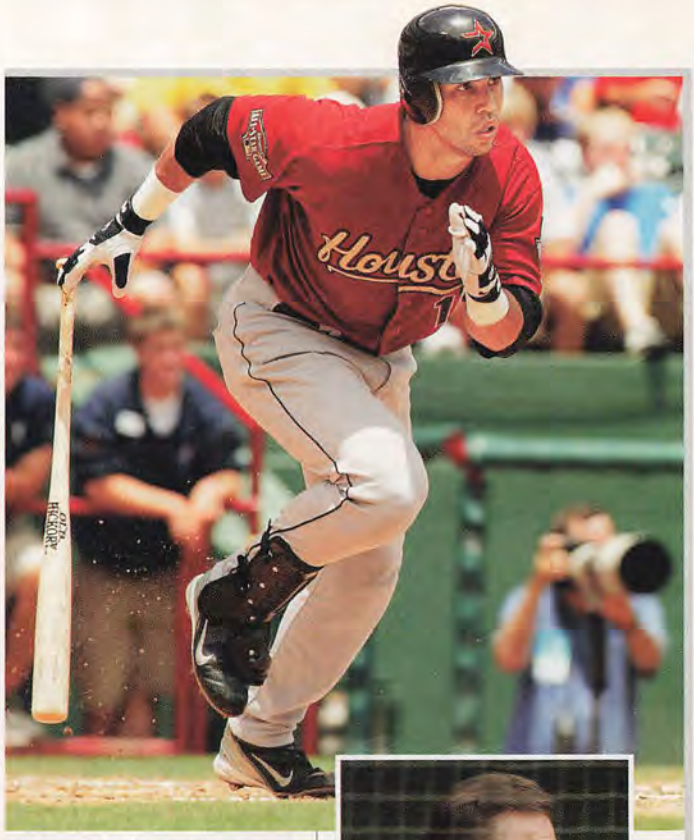
As teams weigh Beltran's worth—Boras has reportedly set the baseline at seven years, $119 million—the five-tool All-Star must ponder these questions.

• *Is there room to shine on the Yankees?* For any other team Beltran's acquisition would be a franchise-changing event; for the Yankees, Beltran would be just another star in a crowded constellation. But Beltran, who toiled for six-plus seasons in Kansas City, craves playing for a perennial contender, and though their payroll is soaring past the $200 million mark, the Yankees still have the resources to make the largest bid. Says one NL general manager, "It might be to the Yankees' advantage to lay low past the January 8 deadline. They might not have to go as high with the Astros out of the picture."

• *Are the Mets for real?* New Mets G.M. Omar Minaya, who was scheduled to meet with Beltran and Boras this week, can't match the Yankees' cash, but he can offer Beltran a chance to be the face of a franchise, alongside new ace Pedro Martinez. Minaya's aggressiveness in this winter's free-agent market may appeal to Beltran, but it would take a leap of faith to believe that the Mets, who have lost more than 90 games in each of the last two years, are a World Series contender.

• *How serious are the Cubs in their pursuit?* Chicago G.M. Jim Hendry covets Beltran, but his inability to trade rightfielder Sammy Sosa, who's due $17 million next season, makes a serious run at Beltran difficult. The Mets could help: If they drop out of the Beltran sweepstakes, they might renew trade discussions regarding Sosa.

• *Does signing with the Astros mean settling for less money?* Time is running out for Houston, and more than Beltran's future is on the line: Roger Clemens's decision to return may hinge on Beltran's. By taking the Astros' offer this week, Beltran might be preempting a lucrative bidding war; but waiting could also lower his value by eliminating one team from the mix. "This is all a big guessing game for Beltran and the teams," says the NL G.M. "No one really knows what's going to happen and when it's going to happen." □



SETTING THE MARKET Boras contends that his client is worth at least $17 million a season.

FROM TOP: RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES; LARRY GOREN/WIREIMAGE.COM; ADRIAN WYLD/AP

Postholiday Shopping

With stars like Adrian Beltre, J.D. Drew and Pedro Martinez gone, G.M.'s don't have much left to choose from on the free-agent market. But as of Monday a few big names, such as **Carlos Delgado**, remained.

PLAYER, POS.	'04 TEAM	SUITORS
JEROMY BURNITZ, OF	**Rockies**	**Giants, Indians**
The D-Backs were courting the 35-year-old, who rebounded with 37 homers and 110 RBIs last year, before turning their attention to Shawn Green.		
CARLOS DELGADO, IB	**Blue Jays**	**Mets, Orioles, Dodgers**
The Mets have made the 32-year-old slugger a three-year offer, but the Red Sox could jump in if they can move Doug Mientkiewicz or Kevin Millar.		
DEREK LOWE, RHP	**Red Sox**	**Tigers, Dodgers**
Exceptional in the postseason for Boston, Lowe, 31, grew up in Dearborn, Mich.—and Detroit desperately needs a front-of-the rotation starter.		
MAGGLIO ORDOÑEZ, RF	**White Sox**	**Orioles, Mets, Cubs**
A surgically repaired left knee has teams wary, though Ordoñez, who turns 30 this month, could move uptown if the Cubs can deal Sammy Sosa.		
ODALIS PEREZ, LHP	**Dodgers**	**Marlins, Nationals**
Perez, 27, the best free-agent lefthander still on the market, said last week that he would love to join Pedro Martinez, but the Mets' rotation is full.		

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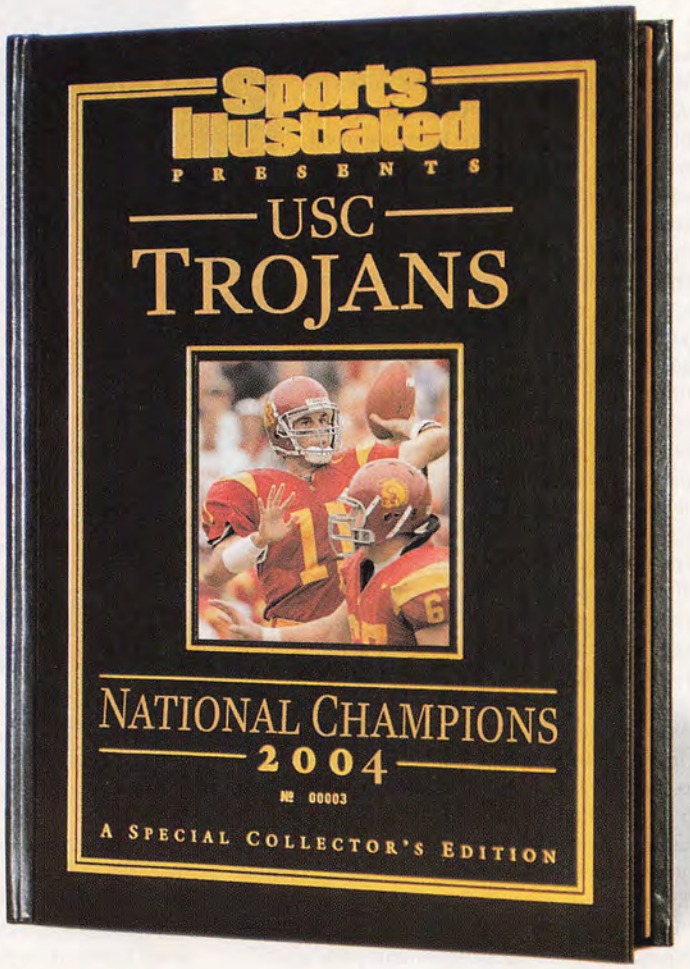

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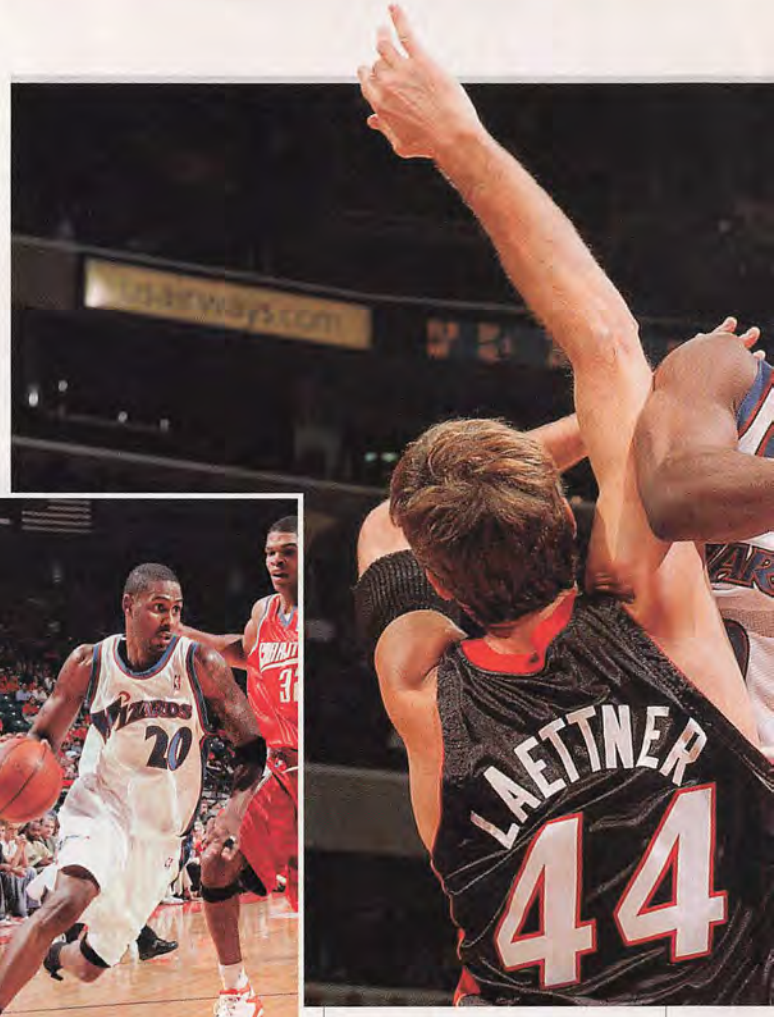
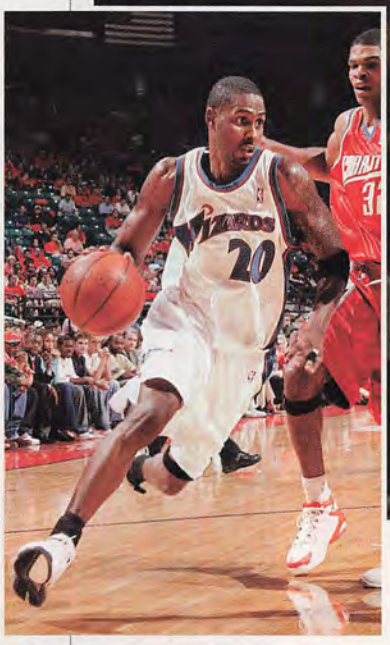
by Ian Thomsen

True Wizardry

A young and multifaceted backcourt has Washington in the playoff hunt for the first time in eight seasons





DOUBLE TROUBLE Arenas (above) and Hughes both can score, board and man the point.

IN THE wee hours of New Year's Eve day, Wizards point guard Gilbert Arenas woke up in the bathtub of his Boston hotel room with his head bleeding. "Then I got out of the tub and woke up again on the living room floor," he says. The cause? A 104° fever that left him dehydrated and delirious. A few hours later Arenas was in the hospital receiving three stitches and IV fluids, and that afternoon he watched from the bench as Washington closed out 2004 with a 108–103 loss to the Celtics. "At this point it's not all about winning," said forward Antawn Jamison, who was proud of his team's tenacious effort without Arenas. "It's about when things are not going your way, you keep your composure and fight through those times."

Arenas bounced back on Sunday with 17 points in a 104–101 win over the Hawks that boosted the Wizards (16–13) to fifth place in the East. It also put them on track for 45 wins, which would be the franchise's highest total in 26 years. "We're doing it without any post presence at all," says coach Eddie Jordan, who hopes to have power forwards Kwame Brown (strained right ankle tendon) and Etan Thomas (abdominal strain) back in the rotation by next month.

Until then Washington will continue driving for its first playoff berth since 1997 on the young legs of the league's highest-scoring trio—Arenas (22.4 points per game at week's end), Jamison (20.9) and guard Larry Hughes (20.3). This is their second act together: At Golden State in 2001–02 they averaged a combined 30.3 points as the Warriors went 21–61. The key to their improved fortunes is the talented Arenas, who has finally adapted to Jordan's Princeton offense. "Last year he didn't trust the system or his teammates," says Jordan. "I used to call 95 percent of the plays, but now I'm calling 65 percent because Gilbert is running the offense. He's a true point guard."

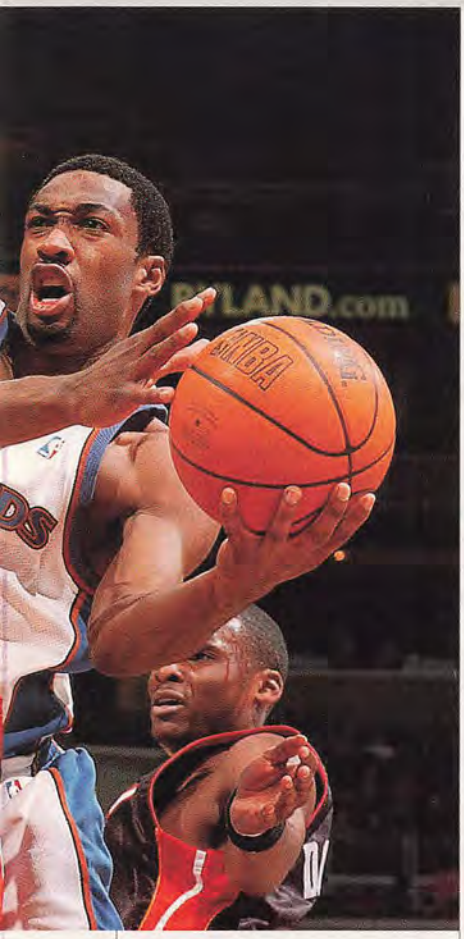
When the Warriors drafted Arenas 31st in 2001, many dismissed him as a tweener—a shooting guard in a playmaker's body. One believer was Ernie Grunfeld, who upon taking the Wizards' G.M. job in 2003 offered Arenas all his cap space with a six-year, $64 million contract. Last year the 6' 3" Arenas averaged a career-high 19.6 points despite an abdominal injury that curbed his quickness and limited him to 55 games. Now healthy, he has exhibited an explosive first step, a mature in-between game and three-point range, as well as a will to win that's unmatched in his locker room. "I may be one of the few guys who can calm

Is T.J. Ford's Career Over?

BUCKS POINT GUARD T.J. Ford hasn't played since last February, when he was immobilized and put on a gurney after a frightening collision with Timberwolves power forward Mark Madsen in which he lost sensation in his extremities. Ford underwent surgery last May to fuse his third and fourth vertebrae, but his spinal cord has remained bruised. While he puts up the confident front of a rehabbing athlete, he has clearly contemplated the dire nature of his injury. "It wasn't like I had an ankle sprain," says the 5' 11", 162-pound Ford. "If I felt that I'd be risking permanent injury, I wouldn't [attempt a comeback]."

Ford was born with an narrow nerve canal at the top of his spinal column, which persuaded at least two teams to rule out drafting him. After Milwaukee chose him eighth in 2003, he suffered temporary numbness during a summer pickup game. Ford has spent more time thinking about life after basketball than most 21-year-old NBA millionaires. He recently created a foundation to help underprivileged children in his native Texas and says he will resume college this year, possibly to earn a degree in social work. (He spent two years at Texas before going pro.) "I've been learning a lot about myself," he says. "We all know you can't play forever. So I do understand that I never know when it's my last day of playing." He pauses and adds, "Last year could have been my last day."

MITCHELL LAYTON/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (ARENAS); AL TIELEMANS (HUGHES); GARY DINEEN/NBAE/GETTY IMAGES (FORD)



him down," Hughes says. "He's not really crazy, he just gets worked up. But you want a guy who's fiery, works hard, gets on his teammates and lets everybody know he's out there to win."

Because he shares ball handling responsibilities with Hughes, Arenas was averaging only 5.1 assists, 27th in the league. (Hughes, with 5.0, was 31st.) Yet their unselfish partnership is bringing out the best in both: Hughes is fulfilling his potential as an all-around player by averaging 6.0 rebounds and a league-leading 2.79 steals, while Arenas has assumed team leadership. Celtics coach Doc Rivers compares the duo's synergy with that of Isiah Thomas and Joe Dumars from the champion Pistons. "They're both athletic, quick, and you don't know who's going to bring the ball up," says Rivers. "They may be the best backcourt in the NBA."

Hughes, 25, will be a free agent this summer, and though he and Grunfeld speak optimistically about coming to terms, that may be difficult. Washington will enter the summer with six players under contract for $43 million, leaving little room. But Arenas refuses to look beyond this season. "It's time for me to make the playoffs," says the 23-year-old, whose knack for burying last-second shots is bound to frighten any postseason opponent. "That's where everyone gets his recognition."

MANNY MILLAN (JAMES); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (OKUR)

AMERICAN IN PARIS

Agent Tries Life As Owner

While representing NBA stars from Europe like Tony Parker and Andrei Kirilenko, Connecticut-based agent Marc Fleisher has made a career of squeezing money out of NBA owners. That's why it was startling when he led a group to buy the French club Paris Racing last July for a reported 200,000 Euros ($271,000). His fellow owners include Parker, who played for Racing from 1999 to 2001. "I've found myself being a big pussycat," says Fleisher, who believes that European basketball is about to take off as the growth of digital TV creates demand for sports programming. "When a player calls me up and says, 'I didn't get my [rental] car, can I just have the money instead?' I'm always saying yes."

While the richest European club, CSKA Moscow, spends $25 million for players and operations, Racing's budget is $3.5 million. Apart from a brief controversy in which the players' paychecks were late, a common occurrence in European hoops, Paris has emerged as a feel-good story, with a 10–4 record through Sunday that ranked fourth in the 18-team French Pro A league. Yet Fleisher vows not to let sentiment get the best of his wallet: "We're going to make a budget and stick to the budget." NBA owners, take note. □

Ian Thomsen's Fast Break

AROUND THE RIM

Because of a broken left cheekbone, **LeBron James** *(left)* may have to wear a face mask for up to six weeks. "It took me two to three weeks to get used to it," says **Richard Hamilton**, who wore a mask while helping to lead the Pistons to last year's NBA title. "It would slide, it would get hot; I'd make a move on a guy, and the mask would come right over my face." But he learned to think of it as a shield for absorbing elbows in the lane, and today he has it framed alongside his championship jersey. . . . Bobcats forward **Emeka Okafor**'s streak of 19 double doubles, which ended on Monday, broke the rookie record of 16, set by the Cincinnati Royals' **Jerry Lucas** in 1963–64. . . . The reason the Bulls went 8–7 in December for their first winning month in six years is that coach **Scott Skiles** persuaded his young team to play defense: Through Sunday, Chicago (10–17) was holding opponents to just 42.0% shooting, third best in the league. The Bulls' success may also be a boon to Phoenix, which holds the rights to Chicago's No. 1 pick in 2005 as long as it isn't among the top three.

SCOUT'S TAKE

On the Jazz (11–20), who at week's end had gone 3–15 since **Andrei Kirilenko** sprained his right knee:

"It would be easier if Kirilenko were simply their leading scorer, but he does so much more. Not only does he give them scoring and rebounding, but he's also their best shot blocker. He's the guy diving on the floor, deflecting passes, getting their defense going, driving their fast break by running the lane. Without him they have no identity, and nobody else on their team looks quite as good. Now they're struggling to find a reliable point guard; they're unhappy with what they're getting from Mehmet Okur (right)*; and they're realizing that Carlos Boozer may be an excellent complementary player but he isn't good enough to be the focal point."*

BUZZER BEATERS

3. If the Nuggets aren't interested in keeping interim head coach **Michael Cooper**, then their best bet for a smooth change of command is Mavericks assistant **Del Harris**, who has a good rapport with G.M. **Kiki Vandeweghe** from their days on the bench in Dallas.

2. Though this group is inferior to the high school class that produced eight No. 1 picks last year, look for as many **teenagers** to enter the 2005 draft out of fear that next season's collective bargaining agreement will have a 20-year-old minimum-age rule.

1. Where have you gone, **Detroit Pistons**? You're letting down the millions of traditional basketball fans who were counting on you to confirm that it is better to play as a team than rely on a superstar.

News and Jack McCallum's analysis, every week at **SI.com/basketball**.

Saved by The Deep

by Rick Reilly

WHEN WARREN and Julie Lavender surfaced from their first-ever certified scuba dive on the day after Christmas, they pulled off their masks, looked at each other and said, "That sucked."

Then Warren threw up.

The dive had sucked because the water was choppy on the surface and the current was hellaciously strong at the bottom and the fish were all hiding in crevices for some reason. The Lavenders happily climbed into the dive boat for the half-hour trip back to the beach, where glorious Alka-Seltzer awaited.

On the way Julie noticed something weird in the water. "Somebody's wallet," she said, pointing at it. Then came a chair. Then a coconut tree.

Then Warren noticed something worse—a horrified look on the captain's face. He spun around to see that the beach wasn't there anymore. "That's when we knew something was very, very wrong," Warren remembers. "That beach had to be 150 meters wide, and it was just . . . gone." So were the docks. Waves were crashing straight into the hotels, some of which caved in like sandcastles.

The Lavenders had unknowingly scuba-dived through a tsunami, which was now hammering their vacation spot, the resort town of Beruwala on the western coast of Sri Lanka, gobbling up homes and boats and people, pulling them into the Indian Ocean and then flinging them back at the town again and again, killing hundreds.

Suddenly, it all made sense to the novice divers, the way they'd had to fight the torrential current at the bottom. "It was like a hurricane underwater," is how Warren describes it. Twenty meters below the surface, his mask was ripped off. It was all they could do to hold on to coral to avoid being sucked away. "We were hanging parallel to the ocean floor," Julie says. Warren is 6' 4", 280, but Julie is only 5' 3". "I was terrified Julie would lose her grip and be swept away forever," he recalls. "I remember thinking, Gee, I could really learn to hate this sport."

They eventually made it to the guide rope and climbed to the sunny surface, where "we just thought it was the end of a perfectly normal dive," Warren says. How could they have known that they'd survived a tsunami that had been moving at up to 500 mph on its way to mauling the coastlines of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka and Somalia, moving entire islands and killing more than 140,000 people in one of the worst natural disasters of our time?

As the boat neared the dive center, Warren says, "everything that the tidal wave had wrecked going ashore was now in the wave coming back at us. The dive instructor told the captain to turn the boat and outrun it, but I said, 'Screw that! Get us on shore!' Because with all the debris flying around in the water, I didn't think we'd survive."

Somehow the baby-faced captain steered the boat through the whirling chaos. He saw a house balcony that had been ripped away and decided to use it as a makeshift dock. Turned out it was the balcony from the dive instructor's guest house. She watched, stunned, as the house collapsed, her new Sea-Doo lit out to sea and footlong angel fish flopped on the lawn.

The Lavenders jumped from the boat to the balcony, then ran in bare feet over smashed glass and brick for higher ground. When they hit the street, the couple saw two policemen running toward them, followed by hundreds of wild-eyed locals. Another wave was coming. The Lavenders ducked into a sturdy three-story concrete building and made it to the top floor as the water rearranged the lobby.

The Lavenders had unknowingly scuba-dived through a tsunami, which was now hammering their vacation spot.

Later, they tried to walk back to their hotel but couldn't find it. Half a kilometer from the shore they passed boats marooned on sidewalks. The Lavenders spent the night on the cement floor of a hilltop home that the owner had opened to the stranded. The next day Warren found the now unemployed dive boat captain wandering the streets, picked the guy up, hugged him and gushed, "You saved our lives!" Then he handed him every rupee in his pocket.

Two days after the tsunami the Lavenders paid a man triple the usual rate to drive them to the capital city of Colombo for their flight back to Kuwait City, where the Canadian couple are schoolteachers. As they drove, only emergency and relief vehicles passed them going the other way. The driver wept.

"It seemed so unfair that we could simply buy our way out of a situation," Warren e-mailed to friends later, "and so many others have no choice but to stay."

Looking back, they realize how preposterously lucky they were to just that week have taken up a sport that wound up saving their lives. "If we hadn't been diving," says Julie, "we'd have been lying on that beach."

"Who would've thought," concludes Warren, "that we were in the safest place of all? Underwater." □

If you have a comment for Rick Reilly, send it to **reilly@siletters.com**

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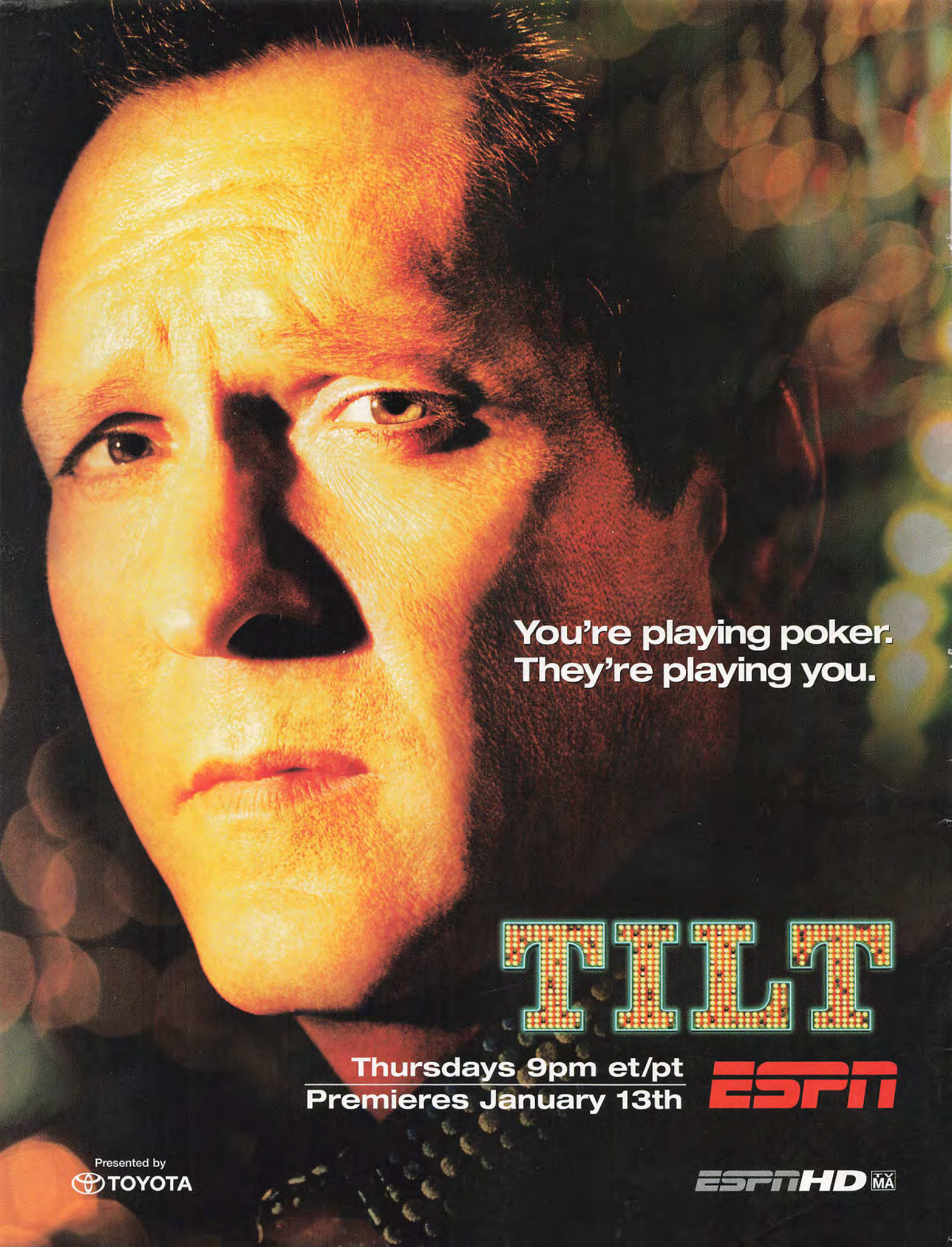
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